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British poetry in the eighties

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Two new books by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the books will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

HAYDEN CARRUTH: *Effluences from the Sacred Caves: More Selected Essays and Reviews*. The University of Michigan Press. $7.95p. *If You Call This Cry a Song*. Countryman Press. $7.50p.

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DANA GIOIA

The Barrier of a Common Language: British Poetry in the Eighties

EVEN FIFTY YEARS AGO it would have been inconceivable for an American interested in contemporary poetry to ignore British verse. Hardy, Lawrence, and Bridges were only recently dead; Housman, de la Mare, and Kipling still active elder presences. Yeats was writing at the dizzying height of his power. Graves and MacDiarmid had emerged as mature talents. Meanwhile an exciting group of younger poets, including Auden, MacNeice, Spender, Thomas, and Empson, had just broken onto the scene. American poetry may have achieved its difficult independence, but the ties to the mother country remained strong. Not to know what was being written in Britain was, very simply, not to have been well-versed. Poetry in English was still widely seen as an unbroken continuum starting in the British Isles and stretching to America and beyond. And if our most celebrated poet, T. S. Eliot, lived in London and spoke with a British accent, that did not seem altogether odd.

Today the situation has changed so drastically that most American readers are not only unfamiliar with current British poetry but modestly proud of the fact. They do not dissemble, but instead urbanely flourish their ignorance as an indisputable sign of discrimination. The clear if unstated implication is that they have concentrated on more relevant aspects of literature. If British poetry has not yet sunk in the American literary consciousness to the marginal status of Canadian or South African verse, it has unquestionably receded to the second rank. Like current Italian theater or Hungarian poetry, it is viewed as an interesting but peripheral subject.

Explaining the dramatic change in our receptivity to British poetry could be the subject of an interesting book. Certainly there were literary reasons—most notably the lack of British poets with internationally acknowledged major reputations and the continuing rivalry between English and American poetic schools. Auden's move to America and Thomas' early death robbed England of its two most celebrated talents, and no equally prominent poets rose to take their places. Indeed at present one of the most conspicuous features of the English literary landscape is the absence of any actively presiding elder poets like Yeats or Eliot whose major accomplishments are generally recognized. The three older poets whose work seems most guaranteed to survive (Basil Bunting, Robert Graves,

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and Philip Larkin) have all stopped writing—not only poetry but prose, and they have all long since left the literary scene. The once prolific Graves has been silenced by senility, Bunting by age mixed with alcohol, and Larkin like Eliot before him by the magnitude of his own reputation.

Among middle-aged English poets only Ted Hughes commands an international audience, and a few others like Geoffrey Hill, Charles Tomlinson and Thom Gunn have small but loyal American followings (though Gunn hardly counts as an Englishman, having lived in the U.S. for thirty years). The few remaining poets with American reputations—like Donald Davie and Kingsley Amis—are known primarily for their prose. The implication here is not that Britain lacks poets of major stature, only that since Auden and Thomas few of them have managed to build significant reputations outside the United Kingdom. Even poets of the stature of Tomlinson, Davie, Hill, as well as R. S. Thomas, C. H. Sisson, and Charles Causley, remain little read abroad.

This isolation is not accidental but the result of both British design and American disdain. The mainstream of British poetry over the past thirty years has tried to minimize foreign influence and assert its specifically national character. The Movement, for example, Britain's most influential poetic group of the fifties, stressed the native features of the English poetic tradition and treated modernism as an ephemeral imported aberration, thereby rejecting many of the assumptions which had temporarily united Anglo-American poetry. Likewise the development of regional poetic movements in the United Kingdom, especially among distinct national groups like the Scottish or Welsh, has too often resulted in a parochial kind of poetry unlikely to interest overseas readers.

Meanwhile America has developed an increasingly chauvinistic and contemptuous attitude towards British poetry. This prejudice, which is rooted in the polemics of modernist writers like William Carlos Williams who struggled for a specifically American poetic idiom, identifies British poetry with the outdated traditions which have historically repressed our native genius. In its current form this attitude asserts that all English poets are overly civilized, hopelessly conservative, and intentionally minor—incapable, in short, of the broad vision and fiery passion of their American counterparts. Needless to say this is a very comfortable assumption for Americans to hold—rather like the theory that most Russian missiles would suffer mechanical breakdown in the event of a thermonuclear war. The demotion of British poetry has been further aided by the recent internationalization of American poetic taste. As our writers increasingly turn to the poetry of the non-English-speaking world for inspiration—especially Latin American and Eastern Europe—England has gradually lost its special position as our international partner in literature.

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Although there are many important literary factors behind it, the failure of dialogue between American and British poetry is also the result of much larger political and economic changes. As America emerged from the Second World War the undisputed political and economic force in the world, it grew proudly self-sufficient in its intellectual concerns and increasingly patronizing to Britain, an attitude the English rightfully resented. At the same time, Britain, financially impoverished by the war and politically enervated by the gradual loss of its empire, entered a difficult period of reassessment. Neither situation fostered an era of perceptive mutual understanding in any field, including poetry. Although the two countries remained indissolubly linked by language, history, and values, the precise nature of the relationship had become painfully problematic.

Whatever the reasons, American and British poetry have in the last forty years begun evolving into two different literatures. Their traditions still overlap, but they are no longer even approximately identical. Their poets view both the usable past and their present agenda very differently. This divergence has not been much discussed, but it is almost universally felt each time a reader in one country picks up a new poem from the other. However good or bad, simple or complex the poem may seem, the reader knows he is missing a fundamental part of its meaning. He senses certain barriers to his comprehension which the author did not intend. These barriers are linguistic, but not primarily caused by obvious factors like differing accents and vocabularies. Rather they result from the deeper linguistic difficulties of two poetic languages shaped by different principles and used for dissimilar ends.

Therefore, while there are significant differences in idiom and vocabulary between American and British English, these in themselves pose no major obstacles. As anyone who has studied a foreign literature knows, one needn't understand every word to appreciate a poem. The difficulty an American faces in approaching contemporary British poetry is in hearing it accurately. "We have," as Dylan Thomas said, "the barrier of a common language." The words are familiar, but they seem arranged by some alien musical system. The two literatures have now reached a point where, as Donald Davie has pointed out, "the American reader can't hear the British poet, neither his rhythm nor his tone." This difficulty isn't only a matter of different accents and inflections, though they contribute. It is a result of two poetries developing for decades along separate lines with little communication. The assumptions a British poet now makes about himself, his language, his work, and his audience are subtly different from those of an American writer. He is not merely writing in a foreign accent. The poem he is creating is in some ways a foreign text. An American remains a privileged translator but a translator nonetheless.

This inability to hear British verse may explain why literate

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Americans have abandoned current English poetry but not the drama, cinema, popular music or television, where performance bridges the widening gap between the artist and his transatlantic audience. In those art forms an American literally can hear the tone and rhythm of the language—usually reinforced by gesture. Likewise British novels have remained accessible since the form is compendious enough to provide sufficient context for its own interpretation. But poetry, the most compressed literary form, the one most dependent on the precision of its language, has become a disadvantaged genre abroad. Whether it ever regains the importance in Anglo-American literary relations it had fifty years ago will depend on the quality of service it receives from critics, poets, editors and anthologists who alone can make it accurately heard and understood.

Anthologies provide the easiest access for American readers into contemporary British poetry, and the lack of reliable contemporary anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic may account for a large part of the apathy and misunderstanding between the two literatures. Therefore the recent publication of two serious selections of young British poets will be of particular interest to American readers. The first of these anthologies is *Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, published late in 1982 by Penguin.[1] Although this collection was met with generally bad reviews, it filled such an important need in attempting to define the younger generation of poets that it became, *de facto*, the standard anthology of the current scene.

Making sense out of the current superabundance of young poets is no easy task, and the Morrison/Motion team deserves commendation for the considerable work that must have gone into their project; but their anthology is not without serious flaws. The major problem is their critical apparatus. Their introduction begins with the bold rhetoric of the literary manifesto. Their claims are so general that the time could just as easily be 1922 as 1982:

> There are points in literary history when decisive shifts of sensibility occur. New, usually aggressive notes are struck; conventions are challenged or broken or simply exposed as being conventions; innovations of form accompany the broaching of unfamiliar subject matter . . . such a shift of sensibility has taken place very recently in British poetry . . . a body of work has been created which demands, for its appreciation, a reformation of poetic taste . . .

Who wouldn't buy an anthology which promised such a transformation? Reading this assertive opening, one expects to turn the

[1] CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY, ed. by *Blake Morrison* and *Andrew Motion*. Penguin Books. £1.95.

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pages and find "new styles of architecture, a change of heart," poems as explosively new as the early *Cantos* or *The Bridge* seemed half a century ago. Instead one encounters twenty very accessible poets, whose work is contemporary without being particularly innovative. The predominant influences are Auden and Larkin—not bad models to be sure, but hardly ones requiring "a reformation of poetic taste."

Unfortunately, the introduction's critical problems don't end there, and its stylistic ones only begin. Adopting an omniscient editorial "we" and lapsing into chic academic jargon (their favorite adjective is "ludic"), the editors start establishing the qualities of the new poetic sensibility, few of which bear much relation to the poems they have included. For example, they gratuitously announce that "the new poetry" rejects "the received idea of the poet as the-person-next-door" (presumably a slap at Larkin). Why then have they included among their opening selections four very straightforward poems by Douglas Dunn and another by Hugo Williams which literally do discuss the people next door? Likewise a little later they state that the new sensibility has "been antipathetic to the production of candidly personal poetry," a principle implicitly refuted by the many excellent personal poems they then include. The problem is simply that Morrison and Motion have tried to define a unified poetic generation where none exists, and in trying to reduce a very diverse collection of poets into a few impressive generalizations they have become blinded by their own abstractions. Not surprisingly, amid all the manifesto rhetoric, the real news in their introduction gets lost, namely that after a rather barren stretch, British poetry is beginning to renew itself. They share the feeling, pervasive in England, that the sixties and early seventies were a wasteland for new poets. Overwhelmed by pop music, radical politics, American poetics, and class consciousness, British poetry entered what Neil Powell has called "that other 'low dishonest decade.' " Now in the eighties, as Morrison and Motion demonstrate in their selections, a new generation of writers has emerged whose talent is matched by integrity and self-assurance.

If Morrison and Motion's enthusiasm for their generation temporarily blinded their critical faculties, luckily it left their editorial abilities largely intact, for *Contemporary British Poetry* is generally an exciting and engaging collection—if also somewhat uneven. Of the twenty poets included only two strike me as truly bad—Paul Muldoon and Penelope Shuttle—and three more as marginal—David Sweetman, Carol Rumens, and Medbh McGuckian. If one also excludes the charming but slight Hugo Williams, that leaves fourteen poets of real substance represented by generally good selections which convey the quality and variety of their work. By current American standards this ratio makes the Penguin book a superb anthology, though that may seem like damning with faint praise.

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Morrison and Motion divide their poets into four slightly overlapping groups—the Northern Irish, the "Martians," the working class, and the narrative. To an American reader these unfamiliar groupings are simply one more sign of how foreign British poetry has become, but to the English they express the editors' literary politics. There are, for example, no Welsh or Scottish poets (except Douglass Dunn who is in some ways becoming more English than the English). Many British readers may feel this omission reflects the editors' London/Belfast bias (though perhaps the editors were honestly unable to find any young Welsh or Scottish poets of sufficient quality—it is difficult for an American to judge). A more obvious omission, however, is the absence of any of the Carcanet poets, the group of young neo-formalist poets clustered around Carcanet Press in Manchester, who form one of the most interesting literary movements in England today. The omission of such a distinguished and influential group was surely deliberate, and reflects a very real but seldom-mentioned ideological rivalry in English letters between London and the provinces (in this case Manchester), a situation not unlike the contention in American poetry between New York and the Midwest. Unfortunately this omission also makes the new Penguin anthology unrepresentative despite its other strengths.

The Northern Irish group makes a very strong impression, particularly Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Tom Paulin, and Michael Longley. As Morrison and Motion point out, Belfast has been as central to the new poetry as London. Somehow the tragic political forces at work in Northern Ireland have created a poetic generation of broad vision and intense identity. Seamus Heaney needs no introduction in America, especially in the pages of *The Hudson Review*, but it is surprising that Paulin and Mahon, who are almost Heaney's equals, are not better known. They are among the best young poets now writing in English. Readers of *Contemporary British Poetry* will want to supplement these selections with Mahon's retrospective *Poems 1962–1978* and Paulin's most recent collection, *The Strange Museum*.[2] These books masterfully reveal that particularly Irish gift of fusing individual and political concerns. The poems reflect the social realities of Ireland without ever betraying the integrity of each author's individual vision. For example, in Paulin's "Second-Rate Republics," political metaphors are so skillfully used to characterize a couple's sexual relationship that the poem begins to take on both a psychological and a social meaning:

> He touches her and she sees herself
> Being forced back into a shabby city
> Somewhere else in Europe: how clammy
> It is, how the crowds press and slacken

[2] THE STRANGE MUSEUM, by *Tom Paulin*. Faber & Faber. £3.50.

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On the pavement, shaking photographs
Of a statesman's curdled face.

Now there is only a thin sheet
Between their struggling bodies
And the stained mattress.
Now his face hardens like a photograph,
And in the distance she hears
The forced jubilance of a crowd
That is desolate and obedient.

At the moment the biggest news in British poetry is the "Martian" school, a group of young poets headed by Craig Raine and Christopher Reid, and well represented in the Penguin anthology. This fashionable gang owes its extraterrestial sobriquet to James Fenton, who, when his friends Raine and Reid shared *The New Statesman*'s poetry prize, pointed out the unusual stylistic traits they had in common. Borrowing the central conceit from Raine's prize-winning "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home," Fenton summarized their mission as an attempt to make the reader see the familiar world in an alien way, especially by using bizarre metaphors for everyday objects.

Book reviewers love nothing more than a new school of poetry. It gives some shape, however illusory, to the depressingly vague mass of contemporary verse that crosses their desks. Not surprisingly, therefore, no sooner had Raine and Reid been playfully nicknamed "Martians" than the term worked its way into general critical parlance. Reviewers fiercely debated the merits of the so-called "school," and for a while any poet who ventured a fancy metaphor was comfortably pigeonholed. The resulting publicity made Raine and Reid famous in the attention-starved world of poetry. Their books sold; their poems were anthologized; their imitators proliferated; and Raine, the undisputed leader of the group, emerged as the most influential poet of his generation—not only the E.T. of English poetry but its Audie Murphy as well, having won nearly every honor and award short of the Laureateship.

A skeptical reader might justifiably complain that there is nothing especially new in the "Martian" theory of poetry, their method being only the latest variation of the many *Entfremdung* techniques that have characterized modern literature. But poetic theory ultimately matters very little and practice very much. And in their practice Raine and Reid have created a tangibly new and different poetry, even if the differences are more of degree than of kind. How is this possible in a period when the average poem is bloated with imagery and metaphor? The "Martians' " metaphorical density and ingenuity of language is not in itself as new as their ability to use it to produce poems of suave and graceful transparency. Their

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best poems are extraordinarily rich without being cloying. Likewise if critics complain that the "Martian" aim of making the familiar world seem new is the traditional mission of poetic metaphor, this too is to be expected. All poetic schools earn their reputations by announcing old truths as new discoveries and claiming private patents on general techniques.

For a sample of the novel way Raine handles his metaphors and language, here are a few lines from the movement's *Urtext*, "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home"

> . . . Mist is when the sky is tired of flight
> and rests its soft machine on ground:
>
> then the world is dim and bookish
> like engravings under tissue paper.
>
> Rain is when the earth is television.
> It has the property of making colours darker.
> . . . .
> But time is tied to the wrist
> or kept in a box, ticking with impatience.

If Raine's importance has been overrated by the media, it has also been underestimated by his critics. He is a remarkably inventive poet with a fine ear. The problem with his work—and indeed that of the whole "Martian school"—is not so much one of present performance but future development. The poetry is often bright, fresh, and entertaining; the question is, how long will it remain so? How long can the "Martian" style be exploited before it becomes tired and predictable? How long can metaphor alone command a reader's attention and hide the frequently mundane content of the poetry? As one critic mused, "Metaphor as a way of life. One wonders if it is quite enough."

Raine himself must sense these limitations, for his latest work, *A Free Translation*,[3] shows him tentatively broadening his scope. While this small pamphlet may not mark a new stage in his career, it does reflect a difficult maturation. These six new poems all written in thin three-line stanzas are quieter and more somber than his early work. The sharp metaphors are still there but less densely, and they no longer serve as the driving forces of the poem. Most importantly, however, Raine now shows more personal involvement in his material, more humanity in his approach. As the *enfant terrible* has become a family man, he seems more keenly aware of the responsibilities people have toward one another. But while this humanity adds weight to Raine's poetry, he has not yet mastered it as distinc-

[3] A FREE TRANSLATION, by *Craig Raine*. The Salamander Press. £2.00.

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tively as he has imagery and metaphor. *A Free Translation* is a curious book. It contains much wonderful writing but no whole poems as captivating as his best earlier work. Almost every line works well, and yet the poems as a whole are disappointing. They are not bad, just not good enough.

While Christopher Reid has also won many awards from the British poetic establishment, he, unlike Raine, has also served as the whipping boy of anti-"Martian" critics. Reid, they claim (not without justification), is a "dandy," an irresponsible aesthete who delights in exotic language and improbable fictions. He lacks, in short, the high seriousness which all right-thinking Anglo-Saxons look for in poetry. These accusations are all indisputably true. Reid is an unabashedly minor poet in an era which demands major gestures. And yet along with James Fenton and John Ash he strikes me as one of the most imaginative and entertaining young poets in England.

Those who accept Auden's theory that the most promising young poet is not the earnest chap with the message but the one who likes to hang around words and see what they're up to will immediately understand Reid's appeal. His work seems motivated almost solely by his delight in language. In his best poems the world becomes not only new but joyfully appealing. The rings left by a wet coffee cup are transformed into Zen calligraphy, or an ordinary recipe for soup becomes a playful sacrifice to the household gods, and in "Zeugma," the final poem of his new collection *Pea Soup*,[4] a rhetorical figure turns into a metaphor for both love and poetry:

> We are two words set free
> from the common dictionary,
> to act with a new, *ad hoc* complicity.
>
> Our only go-between, "and",
> carries its contraband
> in a package the unpoetic may not understand.

"Working class" is a meaningful term to apply to some British poets since in the United Kingdom class distinctions involving not only values but also language still remain strongly defined. From a sociological standpoint many of the poets in the Penguin anthology (and the Carcanet collection to be discussed later) are working-class, but two of them—Tony Harrison and Douglas Dunn—are notable for the skilled intensity with which they deal with the complex problems of their own class origins and identities. Harrison, whose work is completely unavailable in the U.S., will be a new name to most Americans, but he is the real thing, a poet of wide range, passionate

[4] PEA SOUP, by *Christopher Reid*. Oxford University Press. £11.95.

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interests, and verbal dexterity who can handle strict forms in an entirely natural way. His virtues are so self-evident that one need only quote him. Here is "Marked with D.," a characteristic short poem about the death of the neighborhood baker:

> When the chilled dough of his flesh went in an oven
> not unlike those he fuelled all his life,
> I thought of his cataracts ablaze with Heaven
> and radiant with the sight of his dead wife,
> light streaming from his mouth to shape her name,
> "not Florence and not Flo but always Florrie,"
> I thought how his cold tongue burst into flame
> but only literally, which makes me sorry,
> sorry for his sake there's no Heaven to reach.
> I get it all from Earth my daily bread
> but he hungered for release from mortal speech
> that kept him down, the tongue that weighed like lead.
>
> The baker's man that no one will see rise
> and England made to feel like some dull oaf
> is smoke, enough to sting one person's eyes
> and ash (not unlike flour) for one small loaf.

Douglas Dunn, the other working-class hero of the Penguin anthology, is one of the most widely read poets in England and deservedly so. His first book, *Terry Street* (1969), which earned him an immediate reputation, is a flawed book which nonetheless makes a profound impression. Writing about his neighbors in a run-down section of Hull (an English city whose closest American equivalent would probably be Buffalo), Dunn believably captured the emotional fabric of their lives. Simple, direct, and humane, the poems overcome their occasional literary shortcomings and collectively make up a powerful composite of contemporary urban life. Most young poets would not have survived such a celebrated beginning, but Dunn had a keen sense of his own limitations. In his next three books, *The Happier Life* (1972), *Love or Nothing* (1974), and *Barbarians* (1979), he slowly developed into a poet of greater technical and thematic range, clearly establishing himself as one of the important young poets on the scene.

But after such impressive development it is disheartening to read Dunn's two latest books, one of them a curiously mixed performance, the other a dull disaster. *St. Kilda's Parliament*,[5] the indisputably better volume, contains some fine poems, but too often it shows Dunn losing touch with the sources of his own strength. Up until this volume Dunn's working-class Scottish background provid-

[5] ST. KILDA'S PARLIAMENT, by *Douglas Dunn*. Faber & Faber. £3.00.

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ed him with a unique perspective on the subjects he discussed. He could understand and identify with the English poor of Terry Street without losing his own objectivity, or write about French culture without sounding out of register. Now he seems determined to create tightly rhymed poems of sophisticated wit, a very high-flown English ambition most unsuited to his down-to-earth Scottish talent. These poems show a great deal of honest effort, but they inevitably sound forced and awkward—like Ted Hughes trying to imitate Sir John Betjeman.

In this volume Dunn has also tried to master a stream-of-consciousness poem through several ingenious verse reveries which recreate the complex turns of his mind in various situations. Dunn must have poured his notebooks into these poems, for they often sparkle line by line with captivating images, engaging metaphors, and unexpected turns of phrase. The trouble is that all but one of them fall apart under scrutiny. The notable exception is "Remembering Lunch," a controversial piece around which English reviewers are taking sides. It has already been reprinted in at least two anthologies (including the Penguin collection). One critic has called it "a long poem of indescribable dullness." But here I must agree with the Morrison/Motion contingent, for I find "Remembering Lunch" fascinating. Written in long, fluent lines musically reminiscent of Ashbery at his best, the poem piles appositional phrase on phrase. But all the ornate music elaborates an argument of classical simplicity—the virtues of solitude versus society. It is a strikingly ambitious poem, rather like a simultaneous performance of "Il Penseroso" and "L'Allegro" rearranged in a contemporary style. In general, however, *St. Kilda's Parliament* reveals broader ambitions that Dunn is only partially able to fulfill. And in the attempt to write allusive poems of wit and ideas he has abandoned the compassionate realism that was so uniquely his own, an asset of which he now seems slightly ashamed.

Despite its faults *St. Kilda's Parliament* does contain at least half a dozen poems as good as anything Dunn has ever written and many of its weaker ones have considerable charm. Nothing so kind can be said about his pamphlet-length poetic sequence, *Europa's Lover*,[6] which ranks as Dunn's only dull and pretentious book. This joyless fourteen-part poem tells of Europa, an awkward symbol for European culture, sex, and inspiration, and her tiresome conversations with a sensitive young man. Luckily no sections of *Europa's Lover* appear in the Penguin anthology, but admirers of Dunn should be forewarned.

The most captivating new poet in the Penguin anthology is James Fenton, whose first full-length book, *The Memory of War*,[7] won al-

[6] EUROPA'S LOVER, by *Douglas Dunn*. Bloodaxe Books. £1.25.

[7] THE MEMORY OF WAR: Poems 1968–1982, by *James Fenton*. The Salamander Press. £6.95.

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most universal admiration in the English press. For once I entirely agree with the media, as Fenton is a welcome presence—a skillful, amusing, and perceptive poet who deals deftly with both light and serious themes. Fenton, who now has one of the best jobs in the world (he is a drama critic for the London *Times*), worked for several years as a political journalist in Indo-China and Germany, and these experiences appear directly in his poetry. His chief literary model is Auden, whose influence appears both in Fenton's superb technical skills and his ability to treat political themes successfully in his verse. Fenton also shares some of Auden's range. He can write with equal success hilarious light verse, like his "Letter to John Fuller" (which suggests that he and Fuller enter a suicide pact to secure their poetic fame), and a haunting serious sequence like "A German Requiem." His poems on Cambodia combine the best features of poetry and journalism, and his remarkable allegory, "The Skip," has the accessibility of a pop song and the integrity of a fine lyric poem. And in every style Fenton works with enviable speed and clarity.

To convey some of his versatility here are two short passages from *The Memory of War*. The first is the sonorous opening of "A German Requiem," a sequence which obliquely describes a visit to a German cemetery full of the war dead and the memories it stirs in the survivors:

> It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down.
> It is not the houses. It is the spaces between the houses.
> It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist.
> It is not your memories which haunt you.
> It is not what you have written down.
> It is what you have forgotten, what you must forget . . .

And now the opening of his apocalyptic nonsense poem, "The Wild Ones," which recreates a Grade-B motorcycle gang movie with a cast of South American rodents:

> Here come the capybaras on their bikes.
> They swerve into the friendly, leafy square
> Knocking the angwantibos off their trikes,
> Giving the old-age coypus a bad scare.
> They specialise in nasty, lightning strikes.
> They leave the banks and grocers' shops quite bare,
> Then swagger through the bardoors for a shot
> Of anything the barman hasn't got.

But while these short passages demonstrate the range of Fenton's talent, they misrepresent its depth. He is a narrative and discursive poet whose real originality shows in his unexpected turns of plot

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and argument. Short excerpts just don't do him justice. Find someone who is going to England and make him buy you a copy of this book.

History, even literary history, moves dialectically. Thesis struggles with antithesis, anthology with anthology. Therefore it is not surprising that Michael Schmidt, publisher of Carcanet Press, whose poets were banished from the Morrison/Motion volume, would edit his own anthology. At present Schmidt is probably the most influential person on the British poetic scene. A Harvard- and Oxford-educated American who holds Mexican citizenship, he has lived in Manchester for many years where he writes, teaches, and edits. His bimonthly magazine *PN Review* (formerly *Poetry Nation*) is arguably the best poetry journal in the English-speaking world, and Carcanet Press, which he founded fifteen years ago at Oxford with a few poorly-printed pamphlets, is now one of the largest literary publishers in England with a backlist of contemporary poetry that only the venerable Faber and Faber can match. Schmidt has used these channels to foster a group of poets, mainly formalists, who are seeking to create a specifically English contemporary poetry. If Auden is the presiding spirit of the Morrison/Motion contingent, Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas are the informing presences of the Carcanet group.

Schmidt's *Some Contemporary Poets of Britain and Ireland*[8] is not, however, a narrowly partisan anthology. He has sought to counter the imbalances of the Morrison/Motion collection with what he feels is a more representative view of younger British poets. He follows the Penguin anthology in choosing twenty poets, but his selections are very different. Only seven poets appear in both books—Peter Scupham, Tony Harrison, James Fenton, Derek Mahon, Tom Paulin, Jeffrey Wainwright, and Andrew Motion—and most of these with very different selections. Two thirds of each book is comprised of entirely different poets. The "Martians" are notably absent from the Schmidt anthology (though there is a note saying that eight poems by Craig Raine were originally planned for inclusion), and popular poets like Hugo Williams and Douglas Dunn are also omitted. Certainly not only royalty difficulties are at work here, but important differences in aesthetics.

Schmidt's taste is generally of more consistent quality than Morrison and Motion's. There are no truly bad poets in his anthology, though there are a few slight ones, especially among his youngest entries like Frank Kuppner or Alison Brackenbury. But if Morrison and Motion's editorial fault was a weakness for the flip and clever, Schmidt's is a partiality toward the overly earnest. He has not only omitted most of the Penguin anthology's wittier poets, but he also

[8] SOME CONTEMPORARY POETS OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND: An Anthology, ed. by *Michael Schmidt*. Carcanet Press. £9.95.

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represented many of his own solely through their most serious work, which limits the breadth of his otherwise catholic anthology. Schmidt also has an insatiable appetite for landscape poems, a taste matched by some of his Carcanet poets who like nothing more than to write about the English countryside. Individually most of these poems are quite fine, but by the end of the book one feels like escaping for a restful weekend in the slums. Perhaps this is a terribly American reaction. The English seem to possess more stamina in country matters.

Not surprisingly, a major component of Schmidt's anthology is a convincing selection of Carcanet poets—most notably Robert Wells, Dick Davis, Clive Wilmer, Andrew Waterman and Jeremy Hooker. Of these Wells and Davis seem the strongest. Working within tight, self-imposed constraints, they have achieved a commanding lyric intensity, as in Davis' "Semele," thematically a remarkable poem about innocence and experience, and formally a small miracle—an entirely successful contemporary sonnet:

> I imagine an English Semele—
> A gawky girl who strayed beyond the town
> Picking at stalks, alarmed by puberty . . .
> Who by the handsome stranger's side lay down
>
> And when he'd gone lay still in meadow-sweet
> Knowing herself betrayed into the world—
> Soft flesh suffused with summer's languid heat,
> The clement light in which the ferns uncurled.
>
> Both faded: meeting him again she sought
> For that half-apprehended, longed-for power—
> The glitter haunting her distracted thought
> That seemed to peer from every leaf and flower,
>
> The glory of the God . . . the girl became
> The landscape's ghost, the sunlight's edgy flame.

Schmidt's selection also has a surprise, namely John Ash, an accomplished experimental poet of wit and intelligence. Ash writes a very sophisticated—one is tempted to say very French—poetry in which facts and ideas are used as images to be combined into beguiling aesthetic structures. The effect is rather like reading Nabokov versified by Supervielle. His presence considerably brightens the anthology.

One of the most troubling features in both anthologies is the paucity of strong women poets. There are just five women in the Morrison/Motion collection and in Schmidt's anthology only two. Are there really so few talented young female poets in the United King-

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dom, or have the editors simply missed them? Certainly the selections in the Penguin anthology are not reassuring. Of its five women poets, three seem particularly weak—though whether this impression is their fault or the editors' is difficult to say. The two remaining women—Anne Stevenson and Fleur Adcock—are very talented, but their inclusion is somewhat ironic since both of them are now in their early fifties (which makes them older than all but one of the male poets) and neither is native English. Stevenson is an American living in England, and Adcock a New Zealander who did not emigrate until she was nearly thirty. Neither of the two women Schmidt has chosen—Gillian Clarke and Alison Brackenbury—appears in the Penguin anthology, though Clarke, whose poems on the villages and countryside of her native Wales have authentic lyric sweep, deserved a place. It is a curious situation. If these two emigrés and one Welshwoman really represent the finest achievements of British women poets fifty and under, then the Muse operates very differently on the other side of the Atlantic.

If ultimately the Carcanet anthology seems more substantial than the Penguin book, it is far from definitive. Schmidt omits two of the finest poets now writing in the British Isles, Dunn and Heaney, and excludes one of the most lively new developments, the "Martians." But perhaps Schmidt was not trying to be definitive. His title, *Some Contemporary Poets of England and Ireland,* hardly implies such a commitment. A reader interested in learning about the new British poetry should acquire both books. There is surprisingly little overlap, and between them he will find at least a dozen diversely talented poets who stand up to any of their American contemporaries: Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Derek Mahon, Dick Davis, Robert Wells, James Fenton, Tony Harrison, John Ash, Craig Raine, Christopher Reid, Peter Scupham, and—despite *Europa's Lover*—Douglas Dunn. Most Americans—especially our poets—will not welcome this news. Or act on it. But the loss is mainly ours. This generation of poets has emerged without much American attention, and there is no reason to suspect that our indifference will stop them now.

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BARBARA HAAS

When California Was an Island

Velvet felt confused about when it was exactly that she fell in love with Griffen. When her husband left them alone in the kitchen she realized that she wasn't so much in love with Griffen then as she was with the desire to do something kind for him. Darcy had just ridiculed him. He'd stalked out of the room, laughing, clutching his head because of the hangover he'd complained about all morning, nearly gagging as he laughed—laughing, coughing, gagging at the same time—in response to Griffen's detailing a theory he'd heard—a theory he said he believed—which held that California had spent one hundred years as an island. Velvet found the theory unusual but his enthusiasm charming, and she wanted to be kind. So she poured him a tall glass of the sassafras tea she had just brewed. The sassafras roots, thin planks all bundled together with string, planks that were a rosy, fresh sunrise color which she imagined was at the heart of everything, were still steeping in the saucepan, and she lifted them with a fork while he watched, curious. He had never, he told her, tried sassafras tea. By the time he finished the glass she gave him—his head tilted back while he drank so that she could see the cords of his throat smoothing up and down, the muscles there—feeling very voyeuristic as she watched the bob of his Adam's apple—and by the time he set the glass down, the ice cubes clicking gently, she already knew. She knew. It was terribly intimate, her watching him drink, though she acknowledged at once that it truly wasn't at all. For Darcy had come back into the room, a crazy smile still on his face, poured himself a glass of sassafras tea, and sat not two feet from her, at the kitchen table, sipping it. The whole occasion fought against any sort of intimacy. It encouraged, instead, blandness, beigeness—the way breakfast still sat about the table: bran flakes soggy in cereal bowls. And she was in fact rushing about to go to work. Velvet was forced at that moment to grab her purse, check for car keys, throw on the purple poly-

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ester blazer that she wore, flying the twenty minutes up to L.A. and the twenty minutes back down several times a day, as a flight attendant for Golden West. She had to brush her hair. While standing there before the hall mirror, she glanced at Griffen. She glanced at where the map he'd brought to illustrate his theory lay, now tightly rolled, on the floor near his feet, and then back to the brushing. Her hair was long and brown and had bronze-colored highlights when she looked at it in a certain light. Griffen moved across the kitchen, behind her, while she stroked with the brush, and she glanced his way again. His head was turned aside somewhat but she felt certain that he had been looking at her before she shifted her eyes. He walked out of her line of vision—over by the stove, she thought; she heard him lift the saucepan—and she glanced back to the mirror, to her wrist as she snapped the brush through her hair, and then up to her face. She had never seen her eyes look more lovely. Her eyes looked lovely and she was on her way to L.A. Some days were such a waste.

By the time she got to John Wayne Airport, by the time she had checked in, greeted this flight's commuters, and climbed—stoop-backed—into the DeHavilland Twin Otter, she had hoped this feeling of wasting, of missing out, would have dissolved, become stale, a mistaken perception, nothing to concern herself with. She stood at the front of the cabin as the plane taxied, holding up seat belts, flapping oxygen masks all over the place, and thought about him. She thought about how one of his front teeth was jammed partially up into his gums from where he must have fallen once. It was a great, wonderful tooth that made him look so boyish. She thought about the socks he wore, even in summer, to warm his feet. They were the sort people made stuffed monkey dolls out of, monkeys with those scarlet, lippy smiles that were actually heels, she'd noticed, on him. She'd overheard him tell Darcy about the flash that came bursting like surf into his sleep, and she thought about that, about how his dreams of earthquake-induced nuclear explosions were—oddly enough, she'd once heard him say—not unpleasant dreams, and only disturbing, he said, in the fact of their constant recurrence. Each week he said he could look forward to that

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flash figuring prominently in at least one dream and playing a supporting role in one or two others. He rented a bungalow on the beach at Capistrano, only a few miles from the San Onofre power plant, and this worried him. She wanted to lie with him there, to save him from his sleeping thoughts.

As she strapped herself into her seat, the awkward box of a plane jerked once and began struggling down the runway; it paused for only a moment, then—plastic panes in the windows jittery, cabin lights flickering as if shorting out, and all the ceiling panels shimmying noisily and shaking—the Otter rocked back and forth under its wings and lurched forward a long time, finally carrying them up into the sky. At that terrible moment when the landing gear lost contact with the ground and was cranked up into the wheel wells and they began to lumber up up up, she understood she did not know how to approach Griffen. He had worked with her husband so long—they were both engineers at the Fluor Corporation—she was afraid he might laugh, or feel pity for her. Both responses would trouble her equally, because she wanted to be subtle for him. She wanted to be deep for him, and cool. She wanted him to find her like that calm, quiet ocean floor divers come upon all at once after what seems like miles and miles of struggling with currents and of sinking deep down. And her last thought before she moved up the aisle to take orders for Tabs and Coors and peanuts and Chablis was a realization that it was too late, between her and Griffen, for precisely that sort of coolness. He'd once seen her deliver a knockdown punch—not a girlish slap, but a fist-clenched wallop—to a man in a crowded nightclub. She'd been waiting for Darcy to meet her there after work, standing up at the bar, checking her wristwatch. The punch impressed Griffen, she imagined, in a roundabout sort of way. It made him want to draw closer. He did, and that is how, in the first place, they met. He'd walked over to her, said, "It's crazy, but I feel I already know you." Her hand ached, as if bits of steel were turning slowly beneath the skin, and her knuckles were puffed up and she did not much feel like dealing with another come-on. But he hadn't come on to her. He introduced himself, said he'd seen a photo of her in her husband's office, and recognized her. He sat on the stool beside her and scooped the ice from his Scotch-on-the-Rocks and pressed it

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to her knuckles, the ice melting and dripping on their knees, but her hand held tightly between both of his, as if snugly in a glove. When Darcy showed up shortly afterward, the pain in her hand was gone, but the three of them joked all night about what she'd done—that punch—about what she'd done to that man.

Now, she stared out the lozenge of window beside her. From the sky the Southland looked as if it had been made to be looked at from the sky: the Coast Highway traffic circle at Long Beach, for instance, was not *merely* round, no, no illusion there—but perfect and lovely—like some compass cut-out imposed on the scene. Catalina seemed adrift, shimmering in its sea mist, almost jewel-like. And that pink-gold cloud of smog which waited, as if moored, over the Southland, which you could study once you were above all the apartment complexes and their pools, some with concrete islands in their middles and palm trees on those islands, the smog that had not seemed so bad while you were in it, but now, seeing it, breathing the oxygen-rich air in the plane, you remembered truly was—seemed almost beautiful.

She flew in that impossible pink and gold all her five trips to L.A. and back, sitting at the back of the cabin, gazing dazedly out the window, once not even bothering to remind commuters to fasten seat belts or put trays in upright positions or to stop smoking before landing.

That morning in the kitchen, just before Darcy burst into fits of laughter and she poured the sassafras tea, Griffen had unfurled his map across their linoleum floor, a common map—like those United States ones hanging in schoolrooms so the children can look at purple Colorado and orange Maine and pink Alabama—one which, when she'd first answered the door to let him in, he'd wielded like a weapon—the map still rolled tightly and secured with a ribbon—resting it there against his shoulder, squinting down its long length, as if through an imaginary viewfinder, sighting her as the target.

"Pow, pow," he'd said.

And Darcy, leaning across the kitchen counter, saw him, called out some greeting—"Hey, dude," or "What's happen-

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ing?" or whatever he'd said—and Velvet had let Griffen come on inside.

He joined them in the kitchen, and she'd leaned against the refrigerator, stirring her bowl of bran flakes, half-listening as they talked. Then Griffen untied the ribbon on his map to show Darcy. "Something spectacular," he told him. "Something not quite believable," he said. He unrolled and unrolled the map across the floor, hobbling on his knees as he straightened each section, hobbling sideways like a crab. The pint of Gilbey's Darcy had polished off the night before stood next to the waste can. He covered it with the map.

"I'm not so sure I want to see this," Darcy said. He sunk into a kitchen chair, his feet stretched out before him.

Griffen looked up, grinning, lifted one of Darcy's feet and flattened the map below it. He said, "Don't let me bother you. Just ignore me."

But Velvet glanced up from her breakfast and didn't know how you could ignore that. It seemed the entire floor was covered with this torn, yellowed map of the States, with parts of Canada and Mexico showing at the top and bottom in orange stripes.

Griffen rested back against his heels. "There was a godawful quake," he was saying, "and then the big split. How do you think the San Andreas fault-line was created? Two shifting crusts of earth. The padres were the first to report it. They kept records and the story was passed along, like some kind of wildfire spreading up the El Camino Real." He pulled a stick of green chalk from his pocket and used it to draw a line lengthwise through the state of California, to indicate where it had split apart. "People talk about waiting for the Big One now," he said. He drew the line from Mt. Shasta through Sacramento and the Mojave all the way to where the Colorado River emptied into the blue Baja gulf. "They *talk* about waiting for the Big One," he said. "But these earthquakes now, they're just after-shocks—even the devastating ones, if you can imagine. Only after-tremors, considerably diminished in size, of that first Big One. The real one."

Darcy sat there, nodding, smiling. "Oh, Griffen," he'd said. "Okay."

And he got down on the floor, too. He rerolled the map,

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gathering it up in quick jerks under his fingers, his wrists flicking. Griffen leaned back, smiling a little, too, as Darcy began to chuckle.

"Oh, Griffen," he'd said. And he rested one end of the half-rolled map at the root of his groin, the other end pointing upward, moving tentatively in the air, as if seeking. "It's an appendage of your paranoia," he'd said, and laughed and laughed.

After Velvet had flown home from L.A., after she'd driven the several miles from John Wayne and come through the front door, she found, spread across the living room floor, over by the tinted patio doors, her old patchwork quilt—its interlocking squares of blue and orange and purple and pink unnaturally radiant in the light filtering through the glass. A straw picnic hamper stood at one corner of the quilt, a long loaf of oddly misshapen bread extending from its partially open lid. There were two bottles of Mondavi Zinfandel, one three-quarters gone, the other, its cork lying beside it. All furniture had been pushed away from the square of quilt, as if to set it off, accentuate its separateness in the room.

Darcy was listening to "Too Drunk to Fuck"—loud—on the New Wave station, and tapping his fingers, smiling along with it because, she thought, he *recognized* it, he could see himself in some of the situations it portrayed. He was drinking from a plastic cup of wine, and she didn't know if he was drunk. The other part of it, though—she wasn't sure about the other part of it. They'd argued much recently; his position at Fluor had been cut to part-time—only temporarily, everyone hastened to assure them, but she wondered. The news came at a point when they had to decide whether or not to refinance their condo, unable as they were to meet the three-year principal when it became due two months before. Neither had got too near the other, as if the merest skin-touch might send them reeling, hurt, through their skinny rooms.

She set down her flight bag, and he turned.

"Surprise!" he said. He flicked off the radio.

She looked at him. He leapt off the sofa, and she accepted the cup of wine he offered her.

"It's a picnic!" he said. "See?" he said. "I even cut some bougainvillea from the neighbor's fence." He pointed out the

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weedy, corkscrew vines, arranged to form one low bush, their tissue-like fuchsia blossoms scattered about the floor.

"Well, where's my sandy beach?" she said. But she did let him lead her over toward the feast. She kicked off her shoes and stood, wiggling her toes on the hemmed edge of the quilt, her heels still balanced back on the living room carpet.

She looked around. She stared out the patio doors. "I half-expected to find Griffen here—trying to persuade you, trying to convince you."

He laughed. He began to mimic him. "Have you ever noticed how California looks like Japan? That its contours are Japan-like? Have you ever wondered if the padres noticed that?" He shook his head and unscrewed the lid of a Ghirardelli olive jar. "The padres," he said. "Oh, God," he said, "at first I thought he meant the goddamn baseball team."

She curled her toes on the edge of the quilt, and waited for more.

"Griffen's a good time," he said. "Get this, though. Some psychic is predicting a mammoth quake late in the day on the twelfth. This Friday, you know. And Griffen's thinking about it. Calculating it. Looking at his maps. Deciding in what way California might split in two. He wants us to come down for dinner that night. Have a party. Keep him company, don't you just know."

"Well, that sounds nice," Velvet said. "It sounds like a good idea."

He stared up at her through the fringe of his bangs. "Uh-uh," he said. "Fluor's got me down in Tijuana that afternoon. Those fuckers," he said, and he sighed. "They've got me presenting designs, talking oil rigs off the Baja."

"Oh," was all she said.

He rolled a slice of provolone and ate part of it. "But you go," he said. "I can drive up from Tijuana in two hours. I won't make it for dinner, but I'll be there."

Velvet thought about how experts were always predicting the quakes, how nothing ever came of those predictions. Once, on a day when no one had predicted anything, she'd sat in a Taco de Carlos, half-way through the Quesadilla she'd ordered, and watched the hanging plants in the window jiggle. "It's a earthquake! *A* earthquake," some kids in the parking lot shouted. They were playing and having a good

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time, wadding up their taco wrappers and hurling them like hand grenades at each other.

"Well, I've got to say I liked what Griffen said. I believed it." She waited. "I wish you'd tell me stories like that."

"I tell you stories," Darcy said. "I tell you stories all the time. Like the one about the boy and girl. How the boy bought the avocado three days ago and ripened it in a paper bag—just like Angie Dickinson does—so that he could strip, slice, and chop it for the salad." He indicated a wooden bowl, shadowy with greenery. "About how the boy made the bread with his own two hands—almost killing the yeast in the process—and then dragged the neighbor's weeds in through the patio door. And how the girl still stands there before him, as if on ceremony, as if uninvited—she hasn't even sat down on the picnic quilt yet—thinking, talking about other things. I tell you those stories," he said. He took a long draught from his wine, watching her, first, over the rim of the cup, then tilting his head back, his eyes smoky and huge as he peered at her through the plastic.

"You haven't even asked me about L.A.," she said.

He spread his arms before him. "I did this *because* of L.A. Because I wanted to do something," he told her, "something fun. Because I knew you'd be up in that old stringbag Golden West calls a plane all day. O L.A.," he said. "L.A. über alles. Is it still there? Does it still smell like burnt toast and garbage?"

She nodded. She said, "I called Coldwell Banker while I was up there," naming their realtor.

He riffled his hands through his hair. "Okay," he said. "Well, okay." He looked at her, his eyes hard on her. "I know we've got to decide about those things. We can wrap one mortgage around another—get creative about it—wrap and wrap until it hugs tight, strangling. Or we can let it all go. We've got to decide about that," he told her, "but not now. This is a night all about being able to ignore those things, right? Can we do that?" He dropped his hands to his thighs with a slap and stared at the food around him. "Anymore, I feel like I'm on vacation here, really, not living, not at home." He looked up at the walls of their condo. "Neither incarcerated nor permanent," he said. "You know, Just Visiting, like on the Monopoly board. Why not live it up?"

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She watched as he fished an olive from the Ghirardelli jar and popped it in his mouth.

"So you wanted me to ask about L.A.," he told her, "and I've asked about L.A. Now, come on," he said. He took her hands in his and pulled her clumsily down to the quilt. He leaned near to kiss her, and when his lips touched hers, she felt him press just the tip of his tongue between them, rolling that olive from his mouth to hers.

He smiled at her surprise.

He said, "We're on that sandy beach as far as I'm concerned."

On Friday, Velvet drove the thirty miles to Griffen's amid tight, tentative traffic and the bad Santa Anas that had blown in from the desert. They swirled about her car and rocked it as she tried to drive steady on the freeway. They were frustrating. She kept expecting them to blow up a storm, but they never ever did do that. She did not know how a place could have a particular natural disaster on one day—say, a Wednesday—and a completely different one on a Thursday. She didn't understand why each day brought something new and different. One day might threaten creative financing, the next earthquake—one an unnatural thing, one natural? Or perhaps too alike, she thought, each concerning pieces—no matter how small, large, or shifting—of real estate.

She fought with the steering to keep the car on the road, and concentrated on Griffen. He had junk—old sundials with metallic-colored glass globes, iron works of art—displayed in the yard around his bungalow. She liked the ten pink plastic flamingoes he had stuck in the sand and ice plants in his backyard—it looked as if they were grazing. Little of the junk was in his house, though. There, he had secondhand furniture. Good Oriental rugs covered the floors. Next to the china hutch stood a female mannikin he'd picked up at a J. C. Penney that was going out of business. He'd sprayed the mannikin gold, and in the summer she wore only the frilly, fluffy part of a pink tutu at her hips. In the winter, he dressed her in a wide batik scarf, as a kind of wraparound skirt, and the tutu lay like a powder puff at her ankles, as if anxious again for summer. Her name was Stella.

Brush fires had started in the canyons and the Santa Anas

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only made them worse. Great gusts of smoke and flying ash billowed up out of the hills. When Velvet stopped at Signal Liquor for wine and came back out, she found her car dusted with a powdery cinder, as if several people had smoked cigarettes while standing there and had tapped their ashes on it.

When she pulled up in Griffen's drive she saw the banner he had slung across his front porch. It read "Merry Big One Day" and flapped frantically in the wind. She ducked under it as she approached the door.

He'd fixed a simple sit-down meal. He left their steaks in the broiler and brought salads over to the table.

"Nice," Velvet said. She admired the single candle in its pewter candlestick.

"Isn't it?" he said. "I feel a little domestic."

"Girls could get ideas," she said, "the kind of treatment they receive in your home." She reached for the French.

Griffen straightened a napkin in her lap and sat across from her. "No," he said. "No, they never do."

She said, "You *need* for a girl to get ideas." She concentrated, hard, on bringing a bit of spinach and avocado to her lips. "Someone carefree. And fun. Someone like me, for instance."

He chewed a moment and smiled. "Oh, someone like you'd never have me."

"No?"

He reached for the French. "And even if she would, she'd realize soon after she had got me home and cut all the price tags from me and taken me out of my box to play that I truly wasn't what she had wanted in the first place."

"Having kept the sales slip," she said, "she could then return you."

He laughed and chewed. "Well, I *don't* think of us in that way."

"What happens when you try?"

"Oh, I think of Darcy approaching madly, wielding a Louisville Slugger. As would be his right," he said. He leaned back, staring up at the wall. It seemed he saw it all vividly there. "It's comical," he said. "It's like some wild burlesque," he told her. "You see the end coming a long way off."

"Whom do you think of in that way?" she asked him several silent moments later in which she had not lifted her fork.

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He appeared surprised. "Why, no one," he said. He leaned in. "Velvet, I've got that island to think of. Poor California. I'm obsessed, I tell you." He fitted a wedge of tomato into his mouth.

"So, there's no one?"

He thought about it. "No," he said. "Well, wait," he said. "No, I don't know." He frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

Velvet looked at her elbows, both balanced on the table on either side of her plate, and her hands cupped, the fingers curled gently in. She was once privy—indirectly, through Darcy—to Griffen's careful courtship of a blonde technician with whom he worked. She was privy to the bunches of flowers he sent this woman, privy to the dinner reservations he made in exotic and special restaurants—even flying out to Palm Springs once, just for the evening. But this courtship had gone only so far, and then no farther. Far enough, Velvet had thought at the time, just to begin to get interesting; not far enough, she'd felt certain, for the magic to have worn off. She had never been clear on exactly why Griffen had ceased his care.

Now, he leaned back in his chair and said, "Stella."

She smiled.

"I'm dreaming of Stella," he told her, his eyes closed. "Cone-shaped breasts," he said. "That smooth shadow between the legs." He grinned at her and picked up his fork.

She turned to the plate before her, the trashy remains of salad there. She heard the steaks hissing away under the broiler. She didn't feel up to the rest of the meal.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She punched on the TV and flopped back against the couch. "I'm wondering about Darcy," she said. She turned an olive pit on her tongue and watched as, there on the screen, Vince Ferragamo let fly a Hail Mary pass. A ribbon of words dashed by at the bottom of the picture, updating various brushfires in the area. "I'm worried about him," she said.

She heard Griffen's bare feet on the kitchen linoleum, that slapping, squeaking sound. She heard the clatter of the broiling pan, then his chinking about in the dinnerware. She stared at his softball trophies on top of the TV—all gold men winding up to pitch balls. She stared at the antique lead figurines there, too, which he collected, figurines he occasionally

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picked up and studied with such exquisite concentration on his face. Lots of things in his house reminded her of fun the three of them had had together. There was a Gumby clinging to the TV antenna which she and Darcy had surprised him with after he told them he enjoyed watching old Gumby reruns each morning on "Kids Karnival." He had an aquarium with nudibranches and sea cucumbers—ugly, tubelike invertebrates—and one triggerfish which swam about, lonely, between decorative chunks of glass. The tank, its bubbling water action, reminded her of the time, the winter before, up at Point Reyes with Griffen and Darcy—an unsettling memory. She closed her eyes and saw circles of ice wheeling about them, smashing against the rocks, and her and Griffen swimming like fools in torn wetsuits among the tidepools while up above, on a low cliff, Darcy crouched, watching. Her limbs had gone prickly numb in the icy water, and she had felt the waves sucking at her, trying to pull her along with them—and too persuasively, for all at once she had wanted to go with them, the water like salt pure and wet at her mouth. But Griffen had charged her, his thick, broad shoulders rising out of the water. He herded her up against the rocks, swam her into a corner there. And clinging to a ledge-like overhang as she gulped water and tried to catch her breath, he had laughed at her. He had snapped his head back, laughing soundlessly, but so hard that his body shook, agitating the water around them, and tears spilled from his eyes, rolled into his sideburns. Then, "Look," he had said. He had pointed out the anemones carpeting the rock there behind her, their scarlet tentacles waving like grass, the tiny crabs dashing sideways, suspiciously, from one pool to another. "Ohhhhh, look," he had said, his finger retiring from an advancing crab.

When Velvet opened her eyes Griffen was sitting before her on the hassock, his knees clamped together and a plate balanced on top of them. The silverware flashed as he cut her steak for her. He had brought the candle from the dinner table over to cheer her. It flickered wildly on the arm of the sofa.

"Come on, Velvet. Merry Big One Day," he told her. He lifted a chunk of meat to her lips.

"This is stupid," she said. She opened for the meat and chewed. "Who's merry here?"

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The TV showed a head shot of Georgia Frontiere cheering wildly.

It occurred to Velvet that Griffen had laughed that time as if to scold her—and also out of some enormous sense of relief.

While clearing the table, cleaning up the kitchen mess, Velvet and Griffen finished the bottle of wine she had brought, and he opened another. He got out some maps—one a ragged parchment thing—and he talked about it, California as an island. He even had one of those tacky tourist postcards which showed giant oranges sprouting from Southern California and luscious men and women diving—bent at the waist—as if off the very tip-edge of the coast, aiming far out into the Pacific. He'd cut the state in two, along much the same jagged line he'd drawn on the map he'd brought to their condo, and showed her what the pieces looked like apart, and how they could be fitted exactly back together again. The color was high in his cheeks—whether from the wine or his enthusiasm, she wasn't certain—but she liked imagining what he explained: the state separated, set adrift. He was cutting a postcard up for her to keep as her very own when the phone rang.

He got up to answer it, and she sat there, handling the pieces.

"You're drunk," she heard him say in the hallway. "Okay, okay," he said; then, "Here," and he leaned around the corner, holding the phone out to Velvet.

She looked down at the mess of maps before her. She took the receiver from him and pressed it against her ear. Darcy told her he was still across the border, that Fluor was jacking him around, that he didn't think he'd be able to get away before midnight. "Just wait for me there," he said. "I mean, from what I hear, fires are skipping across the freeways. Everything's burning. They've shut down the northbound 405. You're safer there," he told her.

But Velvet had to strain to hear him. His voice kept going under static, she kept losing him.

"Look," he said, "we'd be lucky if our condo had burned to the ground by morning. But stay," he said, "and wait. Just make Griffen put up with you for a while. He's got room, and I'll swing by as soon as I can manage it."

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Velvet hung up the phone and told Griffen what Darcy had said.

"Well, don't worry about him. He'll arrive. We can wait for him." He glanced back to the maps on the table. "Come on. I've got to show you what happened to the L.A. Basin when California was an island. And also the Salton Sea. It's how it was formed. At least that's my theory."

They returned to the table and she watched his wide hands as he touched the maps, as he traced the skinny lines so that she had to bend close, following his finger, to see. She finished her glass of wine and he refilled it. After a while the lines began to blur, to swim, to blend back together, as if woven.

Velvet looked at her watch. It was well after midnight. "It's over," she said. "Waiting for the Big One." She held her wrist out so he could read the time.

He leaned back, didn't sigh as she'd thought he might.

"Well, you can't be too certain," he said. "Though really all day I've been waiting for the lampshades to begin wiggling. I've been waiting for things to move of their own accord. I've looked for some tremor to send Stella tottering across the room."

She smiled at that, and glanced at Stella, noticed the scarf at her hips, the fluff of tutu at her feet. She found herself expecting Darcy to come exploding through the door at any moment. She didn't want to stay, she didn't want to wait. But aside from the 405 freeway there was only one other way to go north—up Coast Highway. And it had all those traffic circles, with all those stop lights. It was late and Velvet didn't much feel like stopping.

Griffen began rolling his maps.

"Listen, Darcy will get here. It'll be all right. Okay?"

She nodded. She watched as he tied ribbon around the maps and placed them on the table.

They sat like that for several moments; then, suppressing a yawn with a smile, Griffen shook his head. "I think," he said, "that I better lie down. The wine, you know. We'll still be waiting, though."

Velvet stood when he stood. He had a sofa bed in the living room, but he offered her his bed—a humongous king-sized one, a veritable wilderness of sheets, a bed you could feel lost

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in. He steered her down the dark hallway to the room. "And when he gets here—even if it's three or four in the morning—we're going to get up and have a party. Right?" he said.

He rummaged about in the bureau drawer and tossed her a pair of pajamas. They were large—his size—and made of a soft flannel material, with fuzzy-looking stripes and horizontal lines of green and blue interlaced in the fabric. He left her there on the edge of his bed as she kicked off her shoes, began removing her socks.

She tossed her clothes on a chair, slipped his pajama top on, flicked off the light. Velvet got into bed and lay first on her side, then she rolled over on her back and stared up at the ceiling. When Griffen lay his body down here—and she wondered which side of the bed he preferred—he saw nuclear explosions. "Imagine one blinding flash," she'd heard him say once, "and a dense cloud of red bubbling up there." He'd fluttered his hands, then—the fingers curled gently in. "Bubbling up there," he'd said, "like boiling tomato soup. Bubbling higher than you can stand to look without losing balance. Boom, boom, boom. Boom." This was where she wished to lie, her body against his, around his, on his, as if to protect, as if she could do that.

She watched starlight cut through a crack in the venetian blinds. It seemed to change each time she opened her eyes—sometimes resting half on the carpet, half on the closet door, other times slicing a straight path along the wall. After a while, a while in which she heard the house grow still, only the wind whistling at the windows, the light slashed across the foot of the bed.

Velvet got up and headed for the bathroom. She splashed water on her face and examined the smeared mascara ovals beneath her eyes, then turned off the light.

She'd stood in the living room doorway a long time, letting her eyes adjust. The TV seemed to emerge from the darkness, also Griffen's softball trophies on his shelves—she saw the gleaming contours of those men, those men ready to let the ball leave their fingers, and the bubbling hum of the aquarium seemed to fill the room, the water itself creating a shifting light.

She heard the groan of springs from the fold-out sofa and saw Griffen lift up on one elbow, looking her way.

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"Velvet?" he said. He sat up a bit, the sheets creating deep shadows around his hips, between his legs. "What is it?" he said, sleep in his voice.

It was the last thing she felt she could answer.

She stood until she felt the muscles in her thighs go hard and heavy. Then she moved toward the sofa, sat on the mattress beside him, feeling it shift her way as she did. She rubbed his hand through the covers, slipping the fabric between his fingers.

"What if he comes in?" Griffen said.

But she didn't stop. She lay back against the pillows, her hand still on his. That contact almost alarmed her.

There was the hum from the aquarium; there were objects in the room—TV, trophies, Stella in her corner—objects which now seemed somewhat clearer but still monstrous with shadows.

After a moment, she slipped under the covers.

Velvet placed her hand on the back of his, feeling the bones and knotty veins there, and, like a child playing with a toy car, slid it across her hip, up her ribs; she guided his hand to her breast and held it there. She felt terribly shy at that moment.

He seemed to smile, which didn't make any of it easier. He smiled—she was afraid he might giggle. She felt embarrassed, confused. She felt Cro-Magnon. She felt that had she simply jabbed a finger at her breast and grunted in order to make him understand she wanted him to touch her there she could not have been more obvious. There she was. There wasn't a subtle thing about her.

But Griffen rubbed his fingers across her breast, teasing the nipple, which caused it to pop erect immediately—like a hard little button.

He leaned away from her, still touching her. His eyes seemed so deep in his tanned face. They seemed to know at once all that she was about. The look he gave her, while sweet and serene, said, I did that more for your benefit than mine. She waited, unsure of what to do with that look. She thought at once of jamming her knee up into his groin, and also of bringing her hand around from where it was now hooked under his waistband and slipping it down, gently, to cup him.

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Slipping it down in a jokey way so that he could understand she recognized the silliness they were engaged in.

She did slide her hand around. She stroked him through his shorts, the roomy cotton fabric wrapping partially around his cock, like a kitchen towel or pot-holder around the handle of a too-hot pan.

He giggled at that point.

And she giggled. She felt for the first time that they understood each other.

When she moved to pull his shorts away from his hips, though, he stopped her. He held her hands. "Wait a minute, now," he told her. He pressed against her, his eyes big. He was smiling.

She felt the wildness in his chest reverberating there in her own.

Then he slid his hands up her hips, across her belly, along her ribs. He pulled the placket front of her pajama-top away from her skin and held it out like that, as if in the moment he held it he could choose either to ball it up tightly in his fist—to yank it—or, instead, to undo the buttons. He began to undo the buttons.

"Are you awake?" she asked.

His arm lay partly across her brow, and he lifted it to look at her. She shrugged down lower in the sheets, sliding against him, for warmth. "Good morning," she said.

Griffen turned from her to the window, which seemed only a pale gray page in the wall. "Yeah?" he said. "Is it a good morning? We're still attached? We're not floating?"

They got up and began refolding the bed. It clanked and moaned as they clamped it back together, and then slid easily down into the sofa. They arranged the cushions on it. The room looked as if a bed had never been there in the first place, except there were the small indentations in the carpet, from where its legs had stood, all that pressure.

He seated her on the sofa, taking her hands in his, as you would do for a child, and turned the TV set on.

It was "Kids Karnival."

She watched Gumby and Pokey melt and bend and stretch and curl and roll themselves into bouncy balls while he busied

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himself in the kitchen with the waffle iron. Velvet glanced at the aquarium, the triggerfish lumbering like a cloud between the chunks of glass, casting a pencil-like shadow on the bottom with its long, slender body. It was just waking up, just getting its color back. She thought that Griffen had laughed last night as he had that time at Point Reyes, his eyes glittery, tears leaking from the corners. After trying for several minutes he had rolled from her, finally, his body shaking with silent laughter.

Velvet ate breakfast, then walked down to the beach, sitting for a while, first with only her toes touching the froth and water that rushed in, then her entire feet as the tide began to rise. She sat, the sand melting away underneath her.

Some pipers scurried about, feeding off the tiny goodies the tide left behind. Velvet couldn't see that the tide left anything, but the birds stuck their beaks in the sand nevertheless, making little pocks there, and scampered on their twiggy, backward-jointed legs—moving quickly, like a cartoon parody of hurry—as the tide rushed back. She'd been sitting like that, watching, when she heard someone behind her.

It was Darcy.

He was stumbling amid the ice plants at the crest of the beach, kicking sand up in little clouds with his flip-flops. "Tijuana!" he yelled, and he stopped. His arms were full of things—she saw one of Griffen's pink plastic flamingoes, some folded paper roses. He resituated them and moved toward her. "Teee-ahh Wahh-nah," he said. "Good old Aunt Jane," he said. "I brought you some gifts," he told her. He dropped a plastic bag full of pistachios at her feet and a pack of cigarettes on top of it. They were donkey shit cigarettes.

His breath was beery as he leaned to kiss her.

He said, "I was up all night and this is what's left of it." He pulled two Dos Equis from his windbreaker and popped the top on one. He handed it to her and she watched its foamy head rise around the opening. The can was wet in her hands.

He opened one for himself.

"You look goddamn silly," she said. She pointed to the floppy sombrero he wore squashed low over his face.

"Well, I feel goddamn silly," he said. "And I'm sorry to have missed Griffen's vigil. Though here's what I think. I

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think it happened." He took a sip from his beer and watched a fishing trawler heading out to sea.

Velvet followed it with her eyes, too. The tide had established a rhythm of three crashing waves that truly shook the ground beneath them—the way thunder sometimes can—then the waves flattened completely, fell still and glassy, seemed more like those on the quiet surface of a lake, for several seconds.

Darcy said, "I think the state split its seam last night—say, at some wee hour—and then came back together again—neat—as if glued at the edges. I felt it. I was in some bar with a dirt floor. I'm telling you, I felt that earth shifting under my feet."

"It was the beer," she said.

"Yeah," he smiled. "I had to go outside and lie down for a while. I tripped over a cholla cactus."

He reached into the plastic bag and drew out a handful of pistachios. He began cracking them, eating the meat, and tossing the shells in the sand, which confused the pipers and gulls who flocked about, hungry.

"But here's the thing," he said. "I woke up, got in my car, headed for the border, told them I was an American citizen, and crossed over. Everything was still smoking in San Diego—all the hills—but I felt free. Fuck Fluor. Fuck that condo, too. We're getting out of there."

"Well, we'll have to," Velvet said, "if we don't carry through with the papers."

He batted a shell in the air.

"No, we'll want to get out. *I'll* want to."

Velvet was sifting sand back and forth between her hands, sifting out all the tiny shells. A garland of kelp washed up between her knees but she didn't reach for it.

Darcy said, "Frankly, I hope the place shattered right down the middle, came undone. I hope it's lying destroyed when we get back. Two-by-fours jutting out in all directions, glass splinters, stucco, the tile roof just one avalanche of red dust on the sidewalk."

His fingertips were stained scarlet from handling the pistachio shells, from prying them apart, and she looked at them, looked at the way the dye had sunk deep in his fingerprints, remembering how Griffen had sat on the kitchen chair next

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to hers at breakfast, a filmy speck of blackberry jam on his chin which he didn't know was there. He had asked her over the waffles. They were perfect waffles, golden on the surface and soft inside, almost creamy, the jam melting deliciously and sinking down, forming syrupy pools in that grid of square holes. He asked her if this could continue, if they could try. He said, "Last night . . . " He said it was because he'd been drinking, that that had been the problem, that things could be so different. And she told herself that she wanted to believe him, she wanted to believe what he told her.

She thought she saw his fingers tremble as he lifted his mug of coffee.

And she'd said yes. She truly did want this to continue—it took her only a second to think about it. She did. It was what she had wanted, what she'd felt herself moving toward since she'd first poured that sassafras tea. When she said it, he seemed to sigh. He pulled her to him, his chin resting delicately at her hairline, her cheek pressed to the soft skin of his throat. He barely breathed. She thought he might kiss her. He held her like that, completely still.

The moment stunned her.

When he drew back to smile at her, the look seemed so right in his eyes. But she'd once thought things might be different. She had not thought it would feel like that, like the sting of one strand of hair pulled taut, stuck to the jam on his chin.

Darcy clapped his hands together and rubbed them through the sand. "I'm going to tell him," he said. He stood and gazed woozily back toward the house. "I'm going to tell Griffen he missed out. I'm going to tell him all about how things started shaking down in the Baja."

She watched as he walked away, the flamingo clamped under his arm. She watched until he grew very small, seemed to become the only thing on the beach, something moving away from her, and she wondered. She had got what she'd wanted many times in the past, but now—for the life of her—she could not remember at all what those things had felt like.

The waves boiled up around her, peaked, and dissolved. She listened to the conch-shell sound of it.

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PATRICIA GOEDICKE

Paul Bunyan's Bearskin

These days the whole hide of it lolls across the globe
like a Paul Bunyan bearskin: numb head pointing West,
truncated stubs of the hind legs stretched out
over Florida and then Maine
as hard to hold in the mind as the definitive outline,
bulk, depths, blurred shape of the life
of its least citizen,

clouds of industrial speculation
like flies over a dead body rise, pollute the entire horizon
from North Carolina to Oregon, even as we soar above it
in the rickety grasshopper of the self leaping
through mists of decay, fog clinging to the eyes
from one landing place to the next,
the airport in Washington first, O breath-stopper,
Jefferson's low monument rising
like beauty's breast, the Amazonian army of white buildings
all hovering a few airy inches above ground,

but next comes Harrisburg,
this trip the dirigible almost founders
on three sinister smokestacks, squat radioactive cans
stuck right up out of the river;
as the carcass continues to fester
in the terminal there are souvenirs, the last word in T shirts

except if we drive beyond it,
along the gentle Susquehanna
in curved watery mudflats crocuses and the quiet Amish
stand up beside small houses and lopsided billboards begging
EAT HERE BEFORE WE BOTH GO HUNGRY

and so we do, out of this nettle pluck eggs, pluck daffodils
and shoefly pie, berries a bear might have eaten
once, long ago, before the Sunday afternoon hunters

from Chicago next, the toothed skyline wavering in the lake
where glass fronts glitter, rivers reverse themselves
in the hands of men who believe they were given claws

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to pull down Ursus Major and drink from it and then sling it
back up
to swing on it, from here to the farthest rings of Saturn

and back again, this time to the comfortable wooden steps
and modern riversprawl of St. Louis,
here at the broad belt line
where the eye of the arch is bigger but more humanly graceful,
where the hole in the clouds looks
upwards to the clearing heavens

and the grasshopper jumps Westward,
the mind plays leapfrog
over toiling wagons, man and woman sized wishes
to forget murder, the black man fallen in the street,
the red flowers of rats in tenements, grizzled strip mines
and the gaunt children of the East,

so the direction is North now,
looking for the next opening,
in swirling blankets of white bees
we almost get lost, but settle down heavily through snowfields,
sheet after icy sheet of them
in bleak Minneapolis surrounded

but stalwart still,
with fires roaring in the hearts of trappers
and bankers alike, but most in the doughty wills of voters
blunt knuckled and fingered and muscled
at the chill headwaters of the Mississippi

and then onward, out across the brown rolling ribs,
the waving emptiness of prairies to the ridged shoulders
of the next jumping off place, the dazzling white bone
of barren Salt Lake City reaching up
out of crowned mountains to catch wanderers and keep them

except that it can't do it,
the fantastic palaces of sainthood are too rich
for the thin blood of hope,
the one goad that keeps us going;
peering through the magnifying glass

at each new area on the map,
each detailed piece of anatomy
in startling clarity raised up to us who are still floating
vaguely between all of them,
in the long milky veil of distance,
in the smoky fur of a twilight

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that obscures all but the most ruthless, fierce clamorous rips

so full of themselves it is no wonder we veer slightly South
to the outermost edge of it,
the ragged beachhead of the skin
of troubled San Francisco,
the blue pools of her bays
and shaggy redwoods, in deep orange over the hilltops
the bronze wheel of a choked sun goes down
as the whole East sails in through the Golden Gate

and meets itself coming back; the corkscrew of a Piper Cub
bumbles up the peninsula, in the dark iris of dusk
each North South East West airport exists only to be left
or returned to, from another:
to try to map any one single direction

is to die into dead leather,
the corpse pinned to coordinates no one alive can find
twice in the same place,
so soon geography breaks up
into individual cities and countries,
one-of-a-kind cells breathing
the live rippling spirit of a bear taking up his bed
and walking, no one can predict how or when or where.

Full Circle

1.

Next door it has been quiet
Almost a year since she vanished

Into the meatgrinder cells
Monstrously exploding gone

But still we hear her sometimes
On the other side of the wall

The hoarse voice calls our names

As it often did, toward the end

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Approaching as she disappeared

She swore she would come back.

But sitting in the weak sun
Defiant, painting her toenails red she'd relax

Only a few minutes,
Then get up and roar off

In her high powered car to telephone a lover
Or check up on a friend or her two sons,

She said she wanted to trust us

But jaunty in her slim blue jeans,
Brief ponytail wagging

When we went out to eat together
She always paid for herself,

She'd stiffen against us, insisting
We were to be taken care of first

But with what delicacy in her shoulders
And what humor in her wrists!

Casual as chrysanthemums
Spicy, lining fall borders

In her flaming extremities what contempt
For the white gloves of a past

She still drank, still chain smoked bitterly
On runaway grownup feet to avoid,

For she was a lion of great power:

Because she had deserted them once
She wrote to her parents faithfully

Crossed oceans to visit

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But even in the middle of a smile
Her friends had learned, long since

To be careful of it, the sudden
Fierce show of white teeth

For she was afraid of us also
Stupidly we did not know

Out of our own terminal ache

We kept trying to protect her,
Kept trying to turn her

Into an equal our own
Far off younger sister

2

But by then it was impossible:
After the first operation

She had been given five years
At most, she told us,

She knew the enemy was coming,
She was ready,

Having done her research worrying it
As if it were raw meat

She drew up her papers arranged
What she would leave to the children,

Angular, red-haired, she laughed

With tears in her eyes laconic
As any sage in her belly

Hungrily she would read
All night on the tightrope

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From one nervous cigarette to the next,

But in case of the worst she collected herself,
Stored drastic caches of medicine,

In the morning we'd go for walks,

We'd talk about clothes, we agreed
On suicide as a right

For she was a lion of great power:

Asking and not asking
All the days we knew her,

Passionate, excited but still tentative
The hoarse voice called our names,

With quick fingers ransacking
Religion, philosophy, science

She pored over the texts brilliantly,

Leaving whole paragraphs of illumination
On scraps of paper at our door

3

But would not stay to be thanked.

Wrapping herself in a thin quilt
To keep warm

She told no one of course
When it began to happen,

She said it was only a headache
Maybe she even believed it

She said it was the bed giving her a backache
She bought three new mattresses in one week,

And we thought she was mad:

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As the sparks smouldered, the disease
Hidden from everyone sprouted

In the dry timbers of her brain,

And suddenly she was shouting,
Over the smallest things she fought

Or laughed, for no reason

The words in her mouth twisted,
Turned inside out,

All at once she'd subside

Into the most desperate
Heartrendingly awkward hugs

"Sweetheart", she called everyone staggering
On the brittle pipes of her legs

Until, finally, they took her away
To a hospital in the North

For the flames had invaded the whole house
Before she knew it:

For all her preparations,
The papers drawn up, the pills

There was no strength left to do it,

The last time we saw her
In her jersey nightgown like a teenager

Woozy dragging on a last cigarette
Before bed

Having pushed us all away
With half truths we had to believe

Vaguely the white face waved
High in a window behind smoke

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4

And down here at the end of the telephone
All we could do was rage

At the animal howls the thin figure

Shrunk to child size the convulsions
The shaved head in the bonnet,

But now, slowly, we begin
Little by little to accept it,

For she was a lion of great power:

Though time shreds her into sawdust,
Though the house next door disintegrates

Into bells clanging, into fire
In the blazing stables of her eyes,

Though we look at ourselves lost
In the empty movie theater of the world,

In the books she left us in the mirror

Still, on the other side of the wall
The hoarse voice calls our names,

For she swore she would come back:

The worn sweaters she left us
Shyly, put their arms around us,

In death daring what life did not

Something reminds us, wrapped
In these rough fibers

If giving and taking are one

This circle that is ended
Is only half begun.

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TOM WAYMAN

Mike

A man who knows how to fix things:
at work, staring into a machine
to determine how well two metals bond
and understanding
what here is the fault of an improper adjustment
of the instrument, what is the result of
poor specimen preparation
or whether the whole procedure needs to be repeated
at a different temperature and pressure.
Off work, he lives amid the constant appearance
of damaged toasters, lamps,
washers, stoves
—his own, and what friends bring him:
pulling a Volkswagen engine
because of oil on the clutch plate
and replacing that, or locating the trouble
in a TV set as the on-off-volume switch
and then disassembling the switch, too.
If you have to sum him up:
a child of his is taken to hospital
after a fall once
but the nurses tell him the X-ray is out of order.
He explains he uses these
in his work with minerals, and so
he settles down to repair the X-ray device
to enable the hospital to begin
fixing his child.

Over the years, his mind
has become like a wholesale hardware supply firm—
where the counter clerk can not only show you
the latest in plastic piping

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but is completely familiar with the genealogy
of replacement faucet designs
and is pleased to relate the advantages and disadvantages
of Ford carburetors, GE pumps
or alternative techniques for welding.
Nothing human that is constructed
is foreign to him: if it went together
it can go wrong
but it also can be taken apart
and put right.
Like most such men, he usually works alone,
yet always conscious of the instant he has done all he can
without a particular tool a friend has
or when an object must be referred to an expert
—meaning someone with access to
technical data, repair procedures
or spare parts he doesn't have on hand.

In this life, then,
the broken things
seek him: his laboratory at work
filled with metal rods that snapped,
plastic strapping that gave way,
their owners on the phone to him to discover why.
At home, there is a wooden toy
on which the glue didn't hold for more than a week
and a relative anxious for him to examine
the ignition wiring on a tractor.

His daily achievements,
like everyone's with his abilities,
are a finger in the steadily crumbling dike
of our mechanical world.
But he
is not content with that,
also peering today
far down at the structure of certain atoms
to find out what's wrong with them.

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Country Feuds

Out of town, disagreements between neighbors
are as simple as water:
water rights, diversion of creeks,
water lines
or shared wells that go dry. The feuds
grow naturally as animals:
grazing someone's cows
in return for a spring calf
or whether a quarter of a hog
is equal to a quarter of a heifer
in the fall. Some arguments
root deep in the purpose
of the country: people who want to operate
a small sawmill on their acreage
and the folks across the lane who moved here
for the quiet.

Each winter
the troubles become more intense.
Somebody stops speaking to certain friends
whenever they meet in the village
and much later a phone call is made
Hey, are we having a quarrel?
If so, we can really get behind it.
And if not, don't be so surly when we see you.
These winter hassles are not limited
to a few miles of road. Strange letters to officials
—local, regional and national—
get written in the early darkness
on country tables
and mailed.

At any season
you must be careful what you say.
Zoning, tree farm licenses,

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road access, ducks' eggs
versus chickens',
when carrots are tastiest and should be picked
—all can be tests. In each home
is a list, continually updated,
of which acquaintances are assets
and which liabilities, what stands on specific issues
are to be condemned.
An outsider or newcomer is allowed a few mistakes
but visitors who persistently express wrong opinions
or inquire too often after a name
currently not mentioned on this property
are subject to classification themselves.

To avoid these disputes
you have to stay in the city. Once you turn off the highway
onto dirt roads
you are headed
for a fight.

Motion Pictures

Of all locations to park, my car prefers
country drive-in theatres:
those fields fenced off in the dusk
echoing with the noise of speakers attached to poles
where every vehicle faces the same way
except a few pickups
containing hardy individuals settled down in the back
under coats and blankets.

My car especially enjoys
films about characters on the road
that include travelogue sequences as filler:
shots of strange North American cities

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or European landscapes my car will never visit.
My car likes to observe these distant places
without having had to roll that far,
pistons rising and plunging,
all systems functioning, alert
for any failure.
What my car isn't happy about
are chase scenes: vehicles smashing
together, or swerving onto sidewalks
or down embankments to end in flames.
My car has passed too many overturned trucks
and police flares at other accidents
to successfully remind itself this is just a movie.
And my car seems indifferent
if the plot involves only people
indoors. But when this occurs
it loves to look higher than the screen
and the hills around,
up at the massed stars,
and recollect certain nights
it spent away out on the earth
in gear and travelling.

My car is always a little regretful
when the films conclude
and it has to get in line
down the usual hard highway.

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ROBERT PACK

Lyric Narration: The Chameleon Poet

I

Once upon a time, having just given a reading of my own poems, I was delighted when a woman from the audience came to the podium and took my hand in both of hers in what I assumed was a warm gesture of appreciation and approval. "I feel so sorry for you," she said; "believe me, I understand."

At first I thought she was commiserating with me for an unsuccessful performance, and then I realized that she must be referring to a poem I had read about the death of my brother in a hunting accident. The poem reads in part: "But at his funeral I would not cry, / Certain that I was not to blame for it." I apologized to her, explaining that I never had a brother, that I invented the brother for the sake of my poem. If my hand could have been detached at the wrist, she would have thrown it on the floor, so violent was her disgust with me. "You mean you lied," she said; "you took advantage of my sympathy."

I didn't have the wit then to say that that is, of course, exactly what poems ought to do. Poems tell personal lies in order to express impersonal truths. And even if I had so replied, I doubt that she would have been convinced and not felt cheated. The intimacy of lyric poetry seems to invite a response that assumes an autobiographical revelation has been made, that the poet has offered a confession to his reader. And no doubt he has, even though the historical facts have been selected, rearranged or altered. A convincing illusion is what the poet is trying for—the illusion of a human speaker. This fidelity to creating a convincing illusion marks the poet's seriousness about his art. In my poem, the speaker

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had a brother and the brother died. I sympathize with him. Believe me, I understand how he felt.

II

In his essay, "A General Introduction For My Work," Yeats tells his reader: "All that is personal soon rots . . . Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man. I am nothing." Yeats's message is that the poet should beware of writing from the perspective of the autobiographical self—the self that is neither generalized nor extended through invention, transformation or the identification with others. The historical self is merely chance. Through his imaginative powers, the poet chooses to live many lives and thus to have many selves. It is this composite self from which poems should be born. Keats expresses this same idea in one of his letters:

> As to the poetical character itself . . . it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion poet . . . A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually filling some other body.

Shakespeare, in Sonnet 111, describes his poetic art in exactly this way: "My nature is subdued to what it works in, like the dyer's hand." And in his portrait of Shakespeare, "Everything and Nothing," Borges concludes:

> History adds, that before or after Shakespeare's death, he found himself facing God, and said: "I who have been so many men in vain, want to be one man, myself, alone." From out of a whirlwind the voice of God replied: "I am not, either, I dreamed a world the way you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare: one of the forms of my dream was you, who like me, are many and no one."

Within every creator, Borges suggests, there is an essential emptiness. Perhaps this emptiness resembles the infinitude of

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time that we imagine will follow after we die as individuals. We contain within us the emptiness of the idea of oblivion—it is what we are—and we know that we will return to the nothingness, the absence of ourselves, out of which we came. We seek to fill that nothing, that emptiness, with invented and projected selves, for what we are in our single lives never is enough. And probably even our many selves are felt to be insufficient, for the space of empty nothing cannot be filled, and our desire for life and yet more life, is infinite. Wallace Stevens says, "It is never satisfied, the mind, never."

Nothing himself, the poet must seek to project himself into lives other than his own. Yeats asserts that "a poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work, out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; but he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria." Thus the poet becomes himself in the recreation of himself as other, as someone else. In his *Autobiography,* Yeats says, "I think that all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a rebirth as something not oneself." Out of his fear, out of his sense of incompleteness and limitation, the poet is able to extend himself into new, imagined identities. And this greater fullness of life, as long as one gives credence to these fictions, drives back the dread of death—which is the idea of nothingness—so that one can catch one's breath in a moment that feels replete with life. The poet expresses everyone's need to extend himself into other lives in imagination and in story, and to feel he has experienced those lives.

The sharpest sense we have of human limitation resides in our awareness of having a single sexual identity. We are not complete, and it is the poet's artistic fate to yearn to heal the wound of being merely a vulnerable and dependent part of a larger unity. Self-love without the supporting love of others is a desperate passion. In *Civilization and Its Discontents,* in a passage reminiscent of Plato's description in the *Symposium* of how originally the sexes were one, and how they got split in half, Freud expresses the idea of man's wounded consciousness, his sense that he is not whole, not complete:

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> Man is an animal with an unmistakably bisexual disposition. The individual represents a fusion of two symmetrical halves, of which, according to many authorities, one is purely male, the other female. It is equally possible that each half was originally hermaphroditic . . . We are accustomed to say that every human being displays both male and female instinctual impulses, needs and attributes, but the characteristics of what is male and female can only be demonstrated in anatomy, not in psychology.

There seems to be a fundamental human need, which becomes heightened in the poet, to envision one's self as part of a larger unity, both male and female. Virginia Woolf, in her essay, "A Room of One's Own," articulates this directly:

> It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized . . . Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man where the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated.

The wish for completeness—to be both male and female, both parent and child, to be all possible selves throughout all time, and thus to be whole—a wish that Freud also described as "the wish to be father of oneself"—is enacted by the artist in his projection of himself into others. Thus, in fantasy, he relieves himself and his reader through story and illusion of the burden of his essential nothingness. Yet, unlike the dreamer and the madman, the artist must return his reader to the actuality of his mortal singularity and to his own life. It follows, I believe, that an effective poem must be a dream—a convincing illusion—and a waking return, as Keats says, to "one's sole self." In this return, the poem becomes an act of celebration of the mind's fecund power of identification with others, and finally, a celebration of the finite and the limited self from which imaginative art may spring.

Freud emphasizes that the need for artistic illusion must be based in conscious awareness: "The artist, like the neurotic,

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withdraws from an unsatisfying reality into this world of imagination; but unlike the neurotic, he knows how to find a way back from it, and once more gets a firm foothold in reality." And Wallace Stevens asserts the same idea—that fictional belief must be contained by the rational mind which recognizes the need for human dreaming: "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."

The lyric poet fictionalizes himself, projects himself into others and thus into a fuller life, dreaming, yet returning to the reality of his creature-hood, his limited body, his instant in cosmic time. Yet he must also acknowledge the reality of his central need—the need to dream, to take on other lives and selves in his art.

III

It is apparent that the novelist and the dramatist project themselves into the characters they create, but I wish to show in this essay how the lyric poet—even when speaking as "I," even when appearing to be only his own self—also may be recreating himself as something other than what he is in fact. As Yeats proclaims: "Myself I must create."

In Yeats's poem, "Father and Child," for example, a father recounts an exchange he has had with his daughter:

> She hears me strike the board and say
> That she is under ban
> Of all good men and women,
> Being mentioned with a man
> That has the worst of all bad names;
> And thereupon replies
> That his hair is beautiful,
> Cold as the March wind his eyes.

The father speaks as if he is listening to himself from his daughter's perspective. There are two aspects of his single sensibility, for his daughter has become an extension of him-

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self, even though he only half understands himself by seeing himself through her eyes. The reader hears the father as a biased narrator with a particular point to make. Like Yeats himself, the reader understands more than the narrator does, for he perceives the narrator's uncertainty and confusion as the father's lips tremble over the "m" sounds when he mumbles the line "of all good *m*en and wo*m*en being *m*entioned with a *m*an." The reader is aware of the father's unintentional parody of himself. His language is pompous; he is uncomfortable playing the role of the authoritarian father.

Yeats's parody of the father continues when he describes the man his daughter fancies as having "the worst of all bad names"—which is a verbal gesture of repression. The father cannot speak that name and probably does not know what it is. The poem is resolved when the father takes into his own voice the voice of his daughter who speaks the last lines of the poem through him: "his hair is beautiful, / Cold as the March wind his eyes." What happens at this point in the poem, wonderfully, is that the rhythm radically changes from a regular iambic rhythm to a more highly stressed, irregular rhythm. The stunning last line begins with a stressed syllable on the word "Cold," and is followed by a double stress on "March wind." The troubled rhythm reflects what the father feels—a chill of anxiety in the "i" sounds: "h*i*s," "*i*s," "beaut*i*ful," "w*i*nd." Perhaps what prevents the father from being able to reply in his own poem to his daughter's statement is that she has told him something for which there can be no fatherly reply: the reason she finds the man attractive is suggested by the hint of cruelty in him as in the cold March wind. The father recognizes the truth of this romantic attraction, and knows that it is a force greater than parental persuasion. In speaking his daughter's words, the father has become other than himself for the moment of the poem, although the complexity of the father's character is realized only through the poet's double awareness which the father cannot entirely share. The poet, in this sense, is father, daughter and himself in one.

In Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," we see again a double narrator: a child and a man combined. In the course of the poem we hear the intermingling of their two vocabu-

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laries. The title suggests that we are listening to the poem from the son's—the child's—perspective. It would be a very different poem if the title were "My Father's Waltz."

> The whiskey on your breath
> Could make a small boy dizzy;
> But I hung on like death:
> Such waltzing was not easy.
>
> We romped until the pans
> Slid from the kitchen shelf;
> My mother's countenance
> Could not unfrown itself.
>
> The hand that held my wrist
> Was battered on one knuckle;
> At every step you missed
> My right ear scraped a buckle.
>
> You beat time on my head
> With a palm caked hard by dirt,
> Then waltzed me off to bed
> Still clinging to your shirt.

We enter the poem through the son's memory of his drunken father dancing with him, but as we move into the poem it becomes clear the perspective is that of the child having grown up, remembering this occasion after the father has died. The phrase, "But I hung on like death," is not spoken in a child's voice—it is the voice of the child, grown into an adult, having become a poet, looking back and trying to reenter that scene. The waltz in this poem, from the narrator's and the reader's perspectives, thus becomes both a dance of life and a dance of death, which only can be understood through the adult's perspective looking back, not from the child's perspective. All the child understands at the time is that he feels danger and excitement: "We romped until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf" expresses the child's sensibility through verbs of action. The phrase "My mother's countenance," however, belongs to another vocabulary—that of the grown poet, the adult, who is capable of using abstractions as well as images.

The frowning mother is excluded as the son experiences

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the passion of being roughly wooed by his father at the moment when the bond of their love seems complete and absolute. With the phrase "The hand that held my wrist / Was battered on one knuckle," there is a growing sense of danger and of damage, reinforced by actual pain: "At every step you missed / My right ear scraped a buckle." From the child's perspective, this is a moment of intense happiness, but it contains pain—pain that the child can endure because it brings him closer to his father. "You beat time on my head / With a palm caked hard by dirt" continues the sense of the near violence of the dance, and the image of "dirt" returns the reader to the earlier simile, "like death."

The father, in retrospect, has become an emblem of death for the grown son, the poet; he is now seen as being of the earth, of the dust to which he has in fact returned. The father had waltzed his son off to sleep, and has himself been waltzed off to death. Looking back, the adult son remembers resisting being put to bed, and this moment has become also his resistance to the pain he feels on confronting the memory of the father's death. At the poem's end, the adult narrator is clinging to the memory of his father in the waltz. But the narrating voice that speaks this poem is a voice enriched by being not merely that of a child nor that only of an adult, but the merging of the two as in Wordsworth's phrase, "the Child is father of the Man." Roethke's identity as poet has been enlarged to include both his present and past selves as well as the self of his dead father. He has become the father of his own memory of his father in the three-beat waltz of his poem, which gives new embodiment to the historical waltz of his childhood.

In Robert Frost's "Out! Out!" we hear a narrator who is outside the story he is telling, but who wishes to enter into the scene as one of the characters. As narrator, however, he has only one role to play—the role of witness from outside the scene; essentially, what he will witness is the apparent absence of divine meaning or purpose in Nature and in human affairs. The title of the poem is an allusion to Macbeth's soliloquy which ends with the phrase "signifying nothing." This poem, like many of Frost's poems, is a confrontation with *nothingness*. Toward the end of the poem, the words "little—less—nothing" complete the echo from Shakespeare's play.

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The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them 'Supper.' At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

The confrontation with the meaninglessness of death is anticipated early in the poem with the image of dust: "The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard / And made dust." The poem's narrative arc is of "dust" returning to "dusty death" (Shakespeare's phrase), although the narrator, and reader,

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are at first misled by the "sweet-scented" odor of the cut wood in the breeze. The narrator, along with those who have "lifted eyes," appears to be enjoying a vision of great depth and extension into Nature itself—the "Five mountain ranges one behind the other / Under the sunset, far into Vermont"—as if Nature were beautiful and benign. But the narrator subsequently will realize that he has had a vision of Nature's beautiful indifference which he can describe but cannot affect. He says, "Day was all but done. / Call it a day, I wish they might have said." In that "I wish" we hear the narrator seeking to intrude into the story, to become simultaneously both actor and narrator. Until now, we have seen him as the seemingly omniscient narrator, the removed narrator, but now we see him as a man wanting to enter into the scene, to join these people to help. But he cannot control the world of the story; all he can do is tell it and contain his own grief to the best of his ability as a witness.

We hear the narrator's human voice intrude again in two other places. When he says "However it was," describing the meeting of the saw and the boy's hand, the narrator expresses his reluctance to complete his story of the boy's needless death in that beautiful Vermont landscape. The narrator, however, is not the one who can cry out, because he is not in the story. The boy gives voice directly to his terror, but the narrator can cry out only as storyteller, by implication, in partial identification with the boy whose tale he is relating: "The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh / As he swung toward them holding up the hand." The boy's horrible laughing cry seems to bring him to a final vision which replaces the earlier vision of the five mountain ranges: "Then the boy saw all." But the boy did not see all. All his terror could imagine was that he was going to lose his hand; he was not able to take that terrible imagining to its finality of nothingness—his own death. "Don't let him cut my hand off— / The doctor when he comes." His vision of *nothing* is not complete.

Yet for the narrator, there will be, ironically, an increase of "less," until less becomes "Nothing," and there is nothing he can do. For a moment, his narration is reduced to the impotent word "So," and in that minimal word all his restrained grief is held. In effect, Frost's poem contains exactly what the

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narrator cannot express. That "So" is the narrator's cry of bearing witness to a story that must be what it is in a scene which he cannot enter. He cannot rescue or protect the boy: "the hand was gone already." Yet there is still more *nothing* to perceive: "the watcher at his pulse took fright." In the poem's sense of human helplessness in an indifferent universe, we are all "watchers," and what we see is death without redemption, "signifying nothing." So. So? So! How shall we read that enigmatic word? But the story is not over yet; the boy will die, and someone must tell of it: "And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs." There is a strange coldness in those last lines, a sorrow, I believe, spoken in the guise of indifference. The characters of Frost's poem continue their lives in the spirit of necessity; all the narrator can do, holding in his personal grief, is express it through the telling of the tale which itself becomes an extension of his own identity. He has become—beyond the uncertain "So" of his own voice—the characters to whose lives he has borne witness.

The poems above may be described as having a limited narrator, or a self-deceiving narrator. There are really two voices in the poems—the voice of the character speaking, and the voice of the poet who is speaking through the voice of the character, so that we, as readers, know something about the speakers of these poems that they do not fully realize about themselves. What we know—that they do not know—is what the narrators have repressed because of the circumstances in which they find themselves. We, as readers, sharing the poet's perspective, are not blinded or confused by the narrator's particular situation, but we cannot act; we can only observe. These are the two existential aspects of our lives: we are both actors and watchers. We bear witness to the lives we live—sometimes as if they were someone else's life or a story we have read—yet we must make our personal choices as best we can; we must turn to our "affairs."

I have been arguing that the poet may clarify or enlarge himself through the creation of a self-deceiving narrator or a narrator who is a reduction of himself. The lyric poet may present himself as a character with a partial or diminished self, and yet a larger "I," with full awareness, will be implied by the poem in its entirety by virtue of the context it creates. Blake's poem, "The Poison Tree," for example, appears to be

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set physically in the Garden of Eden, but the poem (except for the title which belongs to the poet) literally takes place in the mind of the speaker. The speaker's mind is a corrupted garden, and the whole poem is a nightmare with a false awakening at the end. The context of the poem is the speaker's self-deceiving mind.

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears
Night and morning with my tears,
And I sunned it with smiles
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright,
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,—

And into my garden stole
When the night had veiled the pole;
In the morning, glad, I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

We see the narrator at the poem's beginning as possessing the ability to understand his own wrath, as having sufficient knowledge to free himself from his resentful anger. As the first two lines reveal, the narrator understands that the expression of wrath can liberate one from one's wrath, and the result of this psychologically achieved freedom is friendship. What we next see, however, in lines three and four, is a foe distinguished from the friend only by the way in which the speaker chooses to regard the foe. He is angry at both of them, but when the speaker fails to exorcise his anger through expression, that anger dominates his mind and usurps his soul. His mind then becomes a perverted garden; his thinking becomes paranoid and twisted: night is mistaken

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for day; fantasy, for reality; lies, for truth. Things that should nurture have a poisonous effect. In his mind, the speaker recreates himself as a Satanic figure, perverting God's natural benevolence in the forms of water and sun into destructive forces. And the apple, which is his own poisoned sensibility, his lie to himself, begins to grow, extending the effect and influence of false knowledge. Throughout the poem, we do not see an objective garden—Nature as it is—we see only the speaker's projection of his own wrath and jealousy. The speaker comes to mistake his own lying mind for reality; therefore the foe exists as foe only because the speaker fears him as a projection of his own wrathful self. Although he does not understand this—for the understanding of the first two lines has been repressed—the speaker suffers from the dread of his own wrath.

Blake's ingenious parallel to the Biblical story reveals that the speaker blasphemously is comparing himself to God, the true creator of the garden. It follows then that the foe who eats the apple is Adam, for Blake is parodying the concept of a jealous God (elsewhere Blake calls him "Nobodaddy") who takes delight in poisoning mankind, his foe, Adam. Through the depiction of the narrator's repressed and poisoned mind, Blake's satire dramatizes his belief that it is a failed imagining on our part to conceive of God as being jealous. Blake shows how people can become corrupted when their imaginations become corrupted and when their religious institutions are founded on repression and false mythology.

As the poem proceeds, everything the speaker sees is distorted by the darkness of his own mind. In effect, the poem is the speaker's nightmare. The snake of false knowledge is implied in the poem through the image of the "pole"—since the medical insignia for cure is a pole with a snake wrapped around it, an emblem of a curative force, evil overcome. But Blake diagnoses the cause of the failure of the mind's curative force, which is the failure of the imagination to overcome repression.

At the end of the poem, the speaker seems to wake up happily; his wrath appears to have triumphed. But there is little reason to trust anything that this speaker says by this point in the poem. He has proclaimed himself as a liar, and to admit that he is lying does not make him truthful, it merely reveals

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to the reader that the admission itself is a kind of lie, since no repentance follows. We cannot trust the speaker of this poem; we only can trust the poem itself—the perspective of the speaker that the poem provides through dramatic implication. What is being repressed, and its consequences, is revealed to the reader through the poet beyond the narrator, the poet who creates the context of understanding, the poem's structure. The poem reveals to the reader exactly what the speaker is lying about even to himself—that he feels good. In the statement "In the morning, glad I see / My foe outstretched beneath the tree," the reader perceives a dreamlike repressed distortion of the speaker's natural impulse to *mourn* the death of his foe who could have been his friend if he had expressed his wrath. But his poisoned mind no longer is free to acknowledge this possibility. His denial of his guilt, his repressed *mourning,* holds him fixed in his own lie.

The figure of Adam at the end of the poem as the murdered foe—seemingly God's enemy since the speaker has fantasized himself as God—is extended into the figure of Christ, the second Adam, in the image of his own crucifixion, "outstretched beneath the tree." The tree of life, through repression and denial, has become the tree of death, and the speaker awakens to his own mistaken nightmare of reality. It is not, however, truly an awakening, for the narrator is trapped in his own mind, his poisoned garden, his guilt; the nightmare will continue. The reader realizes this self-depiction from a perspective opposite to that which the speaker possesses. The reader is aware of what the speaker has falsified, and through this doubling of visions, false and true, Blake presents an image of the mind with its capacity of imaginative understanding while dangerous and vulnerable in its inclination to deceive and destroy both itself and others. With the dramatization of the divided self, Blake provides us with the necessary and true knowledge that can make the healing of the mind possible so that Christian Forbearance (Blake's earlier title for the poem) may be awakened and become an actuality.

The need for unity within every person, the need to transcend one's limited sexual identity and to assume a larger human identity, an androgynous identity, can be seen again in Yeats's poem "Three Things."

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'O cruel Death, give three things back,'
Sang a bone upon the shore;
'A child found all a child can lack,
Whether of pleasure or of rest,
Upon the abundance of my breast':
A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind.

'Three dear things that women know,'
Sang a bone upon the shore;
'A man if I but held him so
When my body was alive
Found all the pleasure that life gave':
A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind.

'The third thing that I think of yet,'
Sang a bone upon the shore,
'Is that morning when I met
Face to face my rightful man
And did after stretch and yawn':
A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind.

The coming together and merging of the male self and the female self is suggested by Yeats through his use of a double narrator in this poem: a woman, after death, remembering the three great pleasures of her life; and an equally disembodied voice that speaks the poem's refrain. The central figure of the poem is Eve who, having once been taken from Adam's rib, has now turned back into the bone which was her original form, the creative essence of Adam's body. And what remains of Adam now that his created self, Eve, has been reduced by death to a bone, is the depersonalized voice of the poem's refrain. Images of mortal limitation and mortal fullness—the bone on the one hand, and the breast on the other—establish the emotional polarities of the poem. Between these two narrators, the poem unites thought absorbed in memory and the refrain's consciousness of loss. The mind's begetting of itself in the double-voice structure of the poem extends awareness into the consciousness of consciousness—the final gift of language.

Within the refrain of the narrator—Yeats's abstraction of Adam—the bone-woman recalls the three basic pleasures of

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life: nursing a child, enjoying sexual love, and, after impersonal sexual pleasure, determining her "rightful man." The poem re-enacts an archetypal story of three wishes, but the underlying irony of the poem is that all of the woman's wishes, granted in her life, have been taken away by "cruel death." Yet the bone's memory of life's pleasures and abundance is so powerful that the sense of loss seems to dissolve in the memory of those fulfilled wishes. The awareness of death's cruelty almost disappears in the intensity of remembered pleasure; thus the poem in its wholeness unifies Yeats's sense of the vanishing of all things with his sense of the imagination's power to restore and contain them in song. The unification of life and death, body and thought, male and female, takes place momentarily, for Yeats, in sexual love, and, more lastingly, in song or art. Consciousness of self and the imaginative projection of self as other, enhanced and complete, survives in the art of the storyteller. The bone, Adam's extension of himself as Eve and as womankind, returns to the sea, the origin of life; but a song survives that disappearance, its measured rhythm like the waves advancing and receding from the shore. In imagining his otherness, first in the figure of a woman, but finally in the form of the poem itself, Yeats, as Adam, can meet "cruel death" like a lover, "face to face," assuaging the dread of his singular life, his limited and mortal identity.

IV

Yeats tells his readers: "The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death . . . They have become God or Mother Goddess." In that image Yeats unifies male and female—God or Mother Goddess—for, ultimately, the poet must be not merely himself, but a storyteller, a larger self, both male and female, both young and old, both blind and consciously aware. Thus, the poet should not assume that he must speak only in his own beliefs and history. Though we die in a single body, covered easily by a little earth, the imagination, facing the abyss of ancient *nothing*, has its visionary

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counter-truth: the power to identify with lives other than our own and to give those lives embodiment in poetic form. That power is the bone within us, the seed, the creative germ. In the words of Erik Erikson: "I am what survives me," or in Yeats's radical defense of art as personality beyond person, as collective life: the world "only exists to be a tale in the ears of coming generations."

V

Last year I was teaching a writing class in which we were discussing what autobiographical events cannot be used in one's poems because they would not seem true to the reader even though they actually occurred in the poet's life. I tried to make the point that the only criterion that matters in artistic choices is what convinces the reader, what enables the reader to believe the poem. I told the class a story about what happened to me in New York City about ten years ago. It was pouring and I couldn't get a cab, so I walked to the nearest subway even though crowds make me anxious. I entered the train, and halfway down the car I saw the profile of my high school friend, Frankie, whom I had not been in touch with for twenty-five years. I pushed my way through the crowd and tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned toward me, I realized that I had been mistaken. It was not Frankie. "Pardon me," I said, "I thought you were someone else." At the next subway stop, the doors slid apart and Frankie walked into the train.

I asked my class if they would believe this story if I told it in a poem. What point could it make? Would it show that the speaker is clairvoyant? Would it suggest that indeed the supernatural does exist? Since I was there in the room, and since my students trusted me even though they were trained in perceiving literary ironies, they assumed that the story I told must have been true. Just as the class ended, I shocked them when I asked if any of them thought I might have made up the story. They pleaded with me after class to tell them if it really happened: "Is it true? Tell me, is it really true?" But, of course, it is possible I invented this story about my class, dear reader, only to make my point to you.

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Along the Wall

Along the wall, at intervals of three
or four feet, small heaps of grass
and leaves, last winter's leavings,
have been by wind collected, found
by various seeds, fertilized by chance,
watered by the rock's veined surface.
Small weeds, even a few wild flowers,
can be found hunched here, hanging on.

Winter Solstice

A pink wash over everything
and the wind down to whisper.
Squirrels stop on bare branches
and blend in so quickly if you look
away you never find them again.

This twilight must happen only
here, only once or twice each year.
I saw it first last winter, black
trees and houses lined up along
the horizon like silhouettes cut

out of paper and set up along
a board in a classroom long gone
into memory, where I first stared
at the shapes light makes on things
and learned I wanted to repeat them.

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Winter Roses

November: the cold walks stark
in sunlight; the whole hillside
filled with snow. On the small
balcony, you stand and stare.
Your coffee cools in the tiny
china cup beside the marble
balustrade where winter roses
bloom in heated glass containers.
The fragile curtains frost
with fresh designs. It is all
years ago now. You stand alone
and see how unobtrusively
the dark fills up the dark.

The River: A Vision

for my son

What I saw was a river, a certain slant
of light cut through large leafless trees
bent almost double. That and not much more.
The dark river moved. The wind dropped off
and the trees bent back upright. The sky
blackened and stars appeared. We walked hand
in hand without speaking toward something
in the distance. I don't know what it was
or whether we reached it. That didn't make
much difference. What did seem important
was the river, old symbol for the stream
of time, running swift and dark beneath the
star-struck sky. But this was just a vision.
Why I would want to tell you anything so
indistinct is not clear, even to me. We both
know that I have been wrong about many things.

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The Room

It will come to that in the end. As you sit,
near sunset, watching the shadows move steadily
up the wall on the other side of the empty room,
you wonder how it all began, if you remember,
if there was a time, a place, when you could say
when. To pass the time you amuse yourself
with thinking it all over again, the little
you remember. There is nothing else to do.
The shadows move more slowly than you imagine.
Their shapes change three or four times, between
morning and night. You wonder if there will come
a time when you will turn your head, your hand
already on the doorknob, and close the door
behind you without looking back, as if you'd
never known the room was there.

A Man and His Hat

Once, in winter, half the world away,
I watched a man chase his hat over
a mountain of snow. The wind carried it
continually ahead of him and he ran
through blown snow as if in slow motion.
He would almost reach it, then the wind
would catch it again and lift it off ahead
of him. He ran and ran but the wind kept
the hat out ahead of him. He climbed through
fences, around bushes, through fits of wind
and swirling snow so that, sometimes, I
lost sight of him. But always the hat
blew off ahead of him until finally I saw
him stop, sit down in the snow to rest,
watch, while his hat blew on and on
until it rounded the mountain and was gone.

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Fragments

At first you think you are still asleep
but the light in the opened window burns
your eyes and the wind has blown the curtain
over the high-backed chair and knocked
the fragile porcelain to the floor. The
fragments lie scattered like fallen flower
petals. This must have been what wakened you.
You lie alone and stare, in this room you
have for only the week, in this place
you never dreamed to be, and think how
strange it has all become. Beyond the window
the steady wind and waves wash the ends
of summer through all your waking thoughts.

October: With Rain

for my son

The way the light lasts longest on a single spot
of windowpane, some small distortion in the glass
that keeps its final clasp of wind and rain as well,
has caught my eye again. My son has grown so fast
toward man I marvel my own age, try to sort out all
the years, run the film as far forward as I dare.
We sit together at the table, this wintry day
with rain, and do not speak although I think we think
the same things out, muse on the rain and windowpane,
and in our own ways try to fill the final outline in.

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PATRICIA CLAIRE PETERS

For Joanna

Nighttime

The air in the graveyard we crossed
Was heavy with spirits as if
The moonlit clouds were
Palpable, earthbound. This air

Became airy the minute we
Stepped into the field where you keep
Your horse, clear Vermont air again,

Fresh as water splashed in our faces.
Clouds obscured the moon
So at first we couldn't see
Your dark colt and then he was there nuzzling

Your hand. I petted his soft nose,
Turned my back to look for feed cans and
He reared up, spooked, and

Crashed his hoofs on my shoulder.
You, my little girl, were shocked, worried,
Angry at the horse. The whole thing was
Spooky, the haunted air, the graves,

The frightened horse, the sharp pain in
My shoulder, your world, my child,
I visit on weekends and
Long to bring you to

My city world towards which we now drive,

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My shoulder aching,
The clouds whipped by this windy night

Like ghostly horses pulling our car
Away, away, away from you.

Walking

Joanna in a local store met
A man who'd just begun
Walking across the country with
His little dog. He had a cause,

Muscular dystrophy, from which his
Own child suffers and he was in
A way walking for his child. Jo has his
Autograph and every time she sees a

Dog like his she tells her story, as
She told me, her childish brush with
Celebrity. Today walking up this dirty,
Grey city street, 200 miles from Jo,

I think of her beginning her school day,
I think of my upcoming long dull day,
I think of that man and dog hiking
For their cause after a night of camping

In N.H. or Vermont and I think of our
Walk this weekend, to "MacDonald's,"
To the store where I bought Jo
Feather earrings and she sassed me,

Confided in me, as we walked back
Under a sky like an elephant herd, I think, briefly,
Of changing direction and hiking the 200 miles to
Her, my only cause my love, my

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Motherhood which I've tucked away again for
2 weeks, the way I fold letters to her
Into envelopes and they bear my love,
My unbearable love which will not walk away.

Skating

It's late and I'm unable to tear
Myself from the novelty of
Color TV. I sit and stare at the

Tube avoiding sleep while you are
Sound asleep, tired after our
Afternoon of roller skating with

Your friends, your teacher.
Little girl, somehow my middle-
Aged legs found themselves after

20 years on roller skates, because
You pleaded, you hung around
Me while your friends whizzed by,

Rock and roll blaring and so
I wobbled awhile then held your hand,
And Amy's, and we skated until

You dropped my hand and I
Was flying to the beat of rock and roll,
I was your age again and free of care,

And yet I watched you with a
Tenderness I've never felt for friend or
Childhood's family. Your ankles hurt,

Your knee, and so we left, too soon
For me to slip back into the middle age I
Never really left because of that

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Mother's love even flashing lights and
Rock and roll couldn't dim a bit.
Joanna, as your teacher said,

Your nearly 12 years have almost passed
Me by and yet I cherish you as if
I always was with you, always knew

Your teachers, friends. Little girl,
Today I sensed your hesitancy,
Your delicacy behind your brave shell. Sweet Jo,

Sleep now, may both our dreams
Be of swift skates flying

Outside time, let our dreams hold hands
The way we've often done so far,
Let no nightmare of leaving come,

Let us skate, my child, rolling
Past the bondage of age and distance,
My love a cradle rocking you.

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MARK JARMAN

Ideal Conditions

If I can count the levels
that hover under the pond's green ceiling—
quick fingerlings and minnows
and the thicker presences
that part them, rising through the clouds of my scratched
lenses,
turning their spotted flanks,
enormous in that room, and scattering
the small like dust in the sun,
then lowering themselves back into the plush mud;

if I can pinch the wings
of the fainting dragonfly whose blue length
pulses once and hangs,
wings that seem laced with soot,
and do it with my butcher's hands like a cat,
and pierce its crisp thorax
with a hook as fine as a mounting pin
and, when it strikes, separate
the perch from the bait, both perfectly intact;

if I can catch a scent
not meant for me, some molecule
in code, an old agreement
between two that I might startle,
following the bee and pulling back the petal,
and recognize the source
under the webbed cornice of honeysuckle,
and look up toward the house
and feel that you will step outside any moment;

if, already alert
within the bars of insect sound,

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that cage of summer heat,
I can focus on your voice
burning its sweetness into the shrill noise
so that, unaware,
you walk out into the lush weather
singing but already there—
if I can imagine song and make you appear;

then I know what I am—
a soul with all windows open.
The world framed in each,
gossiping like a neighbor,
suddenly sucks in breath and can only gesture;
still, I try to speak.
Lavisher of the senses, angel,
here is the place to make
your visitation. I can almost taste it.

Poem in June

My daughter is riding out after rain
in the undercast light of sunset
when the great ash a block away,
studded with grackles like fleas,
turns, for an instant, a color worth
a long meditation on heartbreak. I stop,
and, astride my shoulders, she gasps
and sinks fingers into my hair.

So I save the speech I might have made
to my two-year-old daughter,
saying instead, "Look at the tree.
How many black birds?"
and feel the root-tearing grip in my hair relax
as she trusts me again and responds, "Look at it!

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How many black birds!" I count,
rolling my shoulders to steady her.

And she trills the numbers off her tongue
and keeps counting, looping ahead and back
as if sequence were a thread of grass,
and the years before she was born
and the years she will outlive her parents
and be herself outlived, could be woven to make,
however tangled, one network
of time to hold this moment.

So an odd slant of light turns a tree
of new leaves the color of fall; three birds
perch there, like an October day.
So today, thirty, I can say
how long it takes to grow up. When she is ready,
as children do, she will decide how I lived.
Now she is riding, and for her,
as she cups my ears and points my face,

I am a good horse. At the oily creek,
I watch for fat water moccasins
and set her down at the edge.
I claw rocks from mud
and she pitches them sidearm, underhand, in chance arcs.
They land at her feet, clattering on shingle.
And they hit home, splashing crowns
briefly clear from the black surface.

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CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

Zurbaran's "Still Life: Lemons, Oranges and a Rose" 1633

The lemons are brilliant, implicit
as the halo of the silver plate,
as their lines, like saints' fingers
in older paintings, pointing skyward . . .

The oranges are gold, quintessentially so,
and burn fervently with their basket
in the day-slant—their green leaves
catch and hover, the small clouds
of blossoms seem to dissolve and lift away . . .

To the right, another plate, a cup of water
and one rose half the color of our blood,
or a woman's skin never exposed to sun—
they edge the darkened background
with all the melancholy in desire . . .

In less than a year he will die,
this, the only still life he will paint—
the St. Francis and St. Lawrence are done,
gone into their long, mystic gazes . . .

And so, just out of view, high and to the left,
he has opened his last window to the evening,
to a world clearly ordered for the light . . .

Resting on this plain wood table,
these common objects rise,
ardent in this final realm—
the earth transcendent without us . . .

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JOHN DRURY

The Dry Goods Store

for my mother

She made up games in the loft
Above the material racks.
When her father spread a bolt upon the counter
She peeked down through the railing:

A roll of silk, long as the wake
Of dredging boats on the river.
Flat on the loft's high wharf
She counted up the barges piled

With organdy and taffeta,
Gingham, calico, worsted, crepe.
Multiplied in mirrors, watched
By a headless lady, the metal dummy,

Her father squeezed a bulb
That shot out chalk, marking the hem
With a crooked dotted line.
Overhead, the slow fan groaned.

A jar of dollars
Wobbled along a cable through the store.
The lid unscrewed, he pinched
And twisted out the money.

Bills rustled in the cash drawer, bells
Rang lightly as the door pane shuddered.
Her father returned to work
Before the customers vanished, before the bells.

They must have thought him—what?

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And what did she think, doting on thin hair
That bobbed below her, watching him measure cloth
And cut material with a wincing blade?

If she fell, her reflection would rise
Through wood, the watery planks
She pretended she could dive in.
If she tore her frock, would he mend it?

Would he shake her? Would he cradle her,
In his woolen arms, to sleep?
Lips pinned, he turned below her,
Dressing a mannequin behind closed drapes.

Great South Bay

Driving at midnight, depressed,
Heading nowhere in particular—
Over whistling tracks, past wide porches,
Looking for a landmark or the way back—
Suddenly it blackened:
Water, the bay, an island
Of dock lights blinking on the rim.

I coasted down the pier. A car at the end
Flashed its headlights, answered
By moving specks. Huddled men,
Orange from the flashlight one held,
Baited their rigs from a darkened bucket.
A dinghy, poled in the shallows,
Trawled for minnows with a hand-held net.

Yet everything was hushed:
A distant horn, a fisherman
Stepping into a boat
On the pier-high waves,
The whole pier muffled to whispers
In the clearing of night,
In the water's wide basilica.

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EDWARD MORIN

Bullfinches' Mythology

Screened by a summer lilac bush, I stalked
a goldfinch bobbing on a purple thistle.
My hand shot out and snatched the captive, frail
and yellow as an Easter-basket chick.
Brittle feet entreated against closed palms
and tightbilled fear shone through anthracite eyes.

I was eight and felt good showing him off
to friends who touched the windblown down before
I launched him like a model glider plane.
He lolloped into roller-coaster flight
yelling "yip, yip, potato chip" beyond
roadside hollyhocks and our ears and eyes.

Bullfinches we called them, and they're still
my favorites. On a feeder by the window
they crack black thistle seed during cold seasons.
Both males and females turn a dirty green
like olives with brisk wings and a good cause—
to rid the world of all its thistle trouble.

Toward spring, a motley yellow stains their backs.
In snowy willows they are folk guitarists
bending the "E" string till it sounds like "Peace."
Those early Roman birdwatchers, the Augurs,
divined that finches quavering on bare branches
call out forsythia and daffodils.

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LEWIS TURCO

Recollections XI

This was our conceit:
the brilliant gavel of the sun
arced and fell just once
on the treetops beyond the river—
going, going, gone.
Summer had been sold piecemeal
to the gathered bidders.
That auctioneer of hours
reckoned up the proceeds as the crowd
drove down the gravel drive,
bits and snatches of odds and ends
tied down on cartops, tucked into trunks—
goods bought in good barter
with what rare currency.

Our money had grown on trees.
The leaves had measured, from bud to russet,
the corrosion of the heart
from the spring founting in the valley,
the nurture and the nestings.
There followed the flaunting of wings
and a hurliburl of foliage
in thunder and in sunlight.

Summer was spent at last,
bursting into bankruptcy
with a fine splurge that came too late.
The fairweather folk fared well away.
They would not see with what bleak grace
the weatherbeaten might sustain penury.

Nor did we, though we knew
that when the gold was gone

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there would be silver to spend.
There was one last night by the river.
We locked the barn in the morning,
turned off the tap, drained the kitchen pipes,
saw the lawn chairs, the croquet and badminton
stowed in the shed. Then,
the windows reflective of nothing
but sunlight, we drove ourselves away.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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JOHN DRURY's* chapbook, *Fire in the Wax Museum*, was published by the Press at Colorado College in 1980.

EDWARD MORIN's* first book of poetry, entitled *The Dust of Our City*, was published by Clover Press in 1978.

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CHARLES W. MILLARD

Julio González

ART HAS BEEN INFLUENCED by new techniques more in the twentieth century than at any time since oil paints were introduced five hundred years ago. In painting, acrylic-based pigments have permitted artists to work with greater speed and freedom. In sculpture, the appropriation for esthetic ends of an industrial process—the welding of metal—has revolutionized not only the way in which three-dimensional objects are made but also their structures, and hence their look. Welding encourages much the same spontaneity in three dimensions that acrylic paint encourages in two, permitting cantilevering and the development of configurations impossible to achieve in such traditional media as clay, wax, or plaster. Thus, a technical adaptation has allowed sculptors to realize ideas with which they flirted for almost a century, such as eliminating the pedestal, developing raised horizontal compositions, and creating more intimate and complex relationships between space and the object or objects occupying it. The Spaniard Julio González is central to these developments. An artist of great refinement and reticence, González was not primarily a formal innovator, but an artist who possessed a revolutionary technique that permitted him to pursue the ideas of others further than they themselves cared or were able to.

Born in 1876, González was trained as a metalsmith by his father. Although his artistic ambitions focused on painting until he was over fifty, he supported himself by making decorative metalwork and jewelry. These objects manifest the legacy of an ancient Catalan metalworking tradition, which found particularly vigorous expression in the Art Nouveau, while the influence of the intense and prolific esthetic environment of turn-of-the-century Barcelona, centered in the cafe Els Quatre Gats, is to be seen in González' painting. Before the First World War that painting was delicate and subtle, exploiting the febrile mannerism of Picasso's Rose period. Thinly painted, using an Impressionist-derived touch, González' pictures are worked out in restricted palettes and close values. Though occasionally awkwardly modeled, his figures are firm in outline, and tend to be even more Classical in feeling than Picasso's of a few years earlier. Nevertheless, one sees everywhere the influence of Picasso (*Sulky Profile*, c. 1907–9), and through him both Degas (*Woman Bathing Herself*, c. 1910–14) and Toulouse-Lautrec (*Portrait of a Proud Young Woman*, c. 1910–14).

González' early ironwork is wholly Art Nouveau in the free vege-

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table linearity of its design, reflecting particularly the antic decorative intensity of such creative Catalans as Antonio Gaudi (*Bouquet of Flowers*, c. 1890–1900; *Inkwell with Butterfly Motif*, c. 1890–1900; *Buckle*, c. 1900–10). From time to time it also evidences a consciousness of Japanese art appropriate to the Art Nouveau, as in the subtly inflected *Tray with Daisy Motif* of c. 1918–25. González' first sculptural experiments, probably done just before the First World War, were made in two distinct directions. The first and more conventional involves small seated or reclining figures modeled in clay, and a *Couple* of about 1914, particularly complex in its forms, recalls a similarly modest-sized group of a Nymph and Satyr by Géricault. The second, hammered copper portraiture, is no less conventional in its forms but is unusual in its technique. Hammered copper, appropriately related to jeweler's methods, has a broken liveliness of surface which encourages a flickering play of light that tends to fragment the unitary massiveness of the heads for which González used it.

At about the same time, this technique was also exploited by González' friend Pablo Gargallo, whose influence on González cannot be exaggerated. Having settled in Paris in 1900, González began using his countryman's studio for his metalwork in 1902, and by the late 1920s he was producing small objects that might almost be confused with pieces by Gargallo dating from the first decade of the century. *Small Baroque Mask* (c. 1927–8), for example, bears a striking resemblance to Gargallo's *Petit masque à la meche* (1907) and his *Masque aux petits cheveux* (1911). Upon closer inspection, however, one detects differences which prove highly instructive. Gargallo gives his masks the irregular oval of a naturalistically rendered face, bringing out the convexity of forehead and chin, and describing the relation of nose and brow with some accuracy. He allows himself decorative freedom principally in the curling cut metal strips that represent hair. González, on the other hand, creates an object at once more regular and more abstract. Enclosing the features of his mask within a near perfect circle, he eliminates the nose altogether, merely suggests the mouth, and evokes eyes and lashes by straight strips of metal fastened at right angles to one another. While the hair is somewhat freer, it is represented by metal spirals of considerably greater regularity than Gargallo's erratic strips. González emphasizes the shape of the whole by delimiting the head with a metal flange. This reinforces the positive-negative spatiality of an object in which forms are applied directly to a plane surface, suggesting three-dimensionality by inference rather than imitation.

When he first began to devote himself seriously to sculpture, around 1929, González experimented in cut metal sheets, a technique Gargallo was also employing. Gargallo, however, cut and then bent or reassembled his sheets, using the positive and negative relationships thus created not to capture and shape space per se, but to

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evoke the palpability of the objects he represented. As with the masks, González devoted a similar technique to more abstract ends, creating sculpture which is less striking and seems less avant-garde, but which in fact penetrates far deeper toward the heart of the modernist sculptural enterprise. Having cut the outlines of a head into his metal sheet (he also represented reclining figures and, at least once, a still life), González bent the loosened metal forward, or pushed it out from the back, to create slightly overlapping planes. The linear voids created by the parting of the metal became negative drawn outlines of the shapes represented, and the shadows created by the planar relationships helped define the forms. The overall effect is not unlike that of Juan Gris's Cubist paintings, in which relatively large planes overlap in a broad manner, often bending slightly and lightening at their edges. Soon, González' shapes were not only being lifted out of the parent metal but were cut out of other sheets and applied to the irregular round plates that represented the head's fundamental shape. In all cases, the shapes representing hair and features were developed in front of a basic plane, so that González realized in three dimensions the premisses posited by Cubist collage. The vitality of these sculptures is enhanced by their rich, rusted, and varying patinas. *Angular Head* (c. 1930) represents the remarkable culmination of these efforts. In it, González created a radically simplified mask. He began with a face-shaped piece of iron, from which he cut away the central upper portion (the middle of the forehead, as it were). He then bent the left side of the remaining sheet back at almost a right angle. To this bent portion he welded a squarish piece of metal, which replaced most of the segment that had been removed. The resulting void between the new and old elements suggests, if not eyes, at least an expression. Despite the layering and bending in this piece, *Angular Head* is a thoroughly frontal work with nothing hidden. It has no inside and, in a sense, no back, a characteristic emphasized by the fact that one literally sees through it. The formal suggestion of an African mask cannot be escaped, and, indeed, recurs in drawings of the time, as well as in the *Japanese Mask (Portrait of Foujita)* (c. 1928), despite the latter's oriental subject and title. González' ability here to transform decorative patterning and devices into high art evidences the nature of his ambitions and the force of his intellect.

Throughout 1930 González continued to develop variations on the constructed head he had brought to such an extreme degree of abstraction. Cutting and welding, he created relationships of planes that occasionally describe visages in some detail when seen from the front, but resolve themselves into abstract patterns of plane and edge when viewed from the side (*Head of the Small Montserrat*). More often, he established two planes, one behind reading as a head or neck and an inflected one in front reading as features; between the two were sandwiched a secret construction of freely arranged ele-

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ments. This construction resulted in part from the angles at which the planes describing the features—which read as lines when seen from the side—were tilted; partly from circles framing the head that were placed diagonally, linking front and back planes; and partly from structural elements necessary to tie front and back together. Thus, seen from the front these heads present impassive, Jawlenskilike patternizations of form, while from the side they open up into remarkably free and abstract contrapuntal passages.

The *Head called "The Rabbit"* and *Head in Depth* are further examples of González' experiments with space. In both, the features are developed against concavities rather than against planes. This causes space to begin to move back and forth instead of simply being layered against more or less flat surfaces. *Head in Depth* is particularly notable in that the bent plane of the face seems to float against the concavity of the background hair: because of this the sculpture's two major elements, while functioning as a formal and esthetic unit, appear to be physically independent of one another. Capitalizing on this independence, *Head with Chignon* rearranges the planes of which it is composed, placing them at various angles to one another. Here, everything breaks open and the frontality González had favored gives way to a freedom of shape and relationship in which planes resolve themselves into a head only to dissolve into abstract configurations as the beholder moves around the object.

The extraordinary culmination of this tendency is to be seen in *Harlequin (Pierrot)* (1930–31), a complex construction of freely arranged rods and sheets (see next page). Its core is an arrangement of planes, one of them opened into a mesh, which supports a cone. The mesh modulates visually between this construction and the play of linear rods, some of them thickened out substantially, developed around it. It is as if González had turned his other heads inside out, placing everything declaratively on display to be seen and comprehended at once, not discovered. *Harlequin* is among the first successful constructed objects to make void an active partner with solid—a fully three-dimensional object that interacts with its surroundings in opening and closing configurations. It is on this formal basis that almost everything of value in sculpture has since been developed. *Harlequin* also demonstrates how far González surpassed Gargallo in his ideas. The several portraits of Greta Garbo created by Gargallo in 1930—particularly *Tête de Greta Garbo avec chapeau*—are arrangements of curving linear and planar forms superficially similar to *Harlequin*. Most of them, however, are clearly descriptive and naturalistic in character: their total arrangments are intended much less to satisfy sculpturally and abstractly than to represent their sitter. The decorativeness of their forms is not, as in González, transformed into an esthetic statement of any profundity, and they remain charming and curious but without real power to move.

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Harlequin (1930–31)
Collection Kunsthaus Zurich, Vereinigung Zurcher Kunstfreunde.
Photographs courtesy of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

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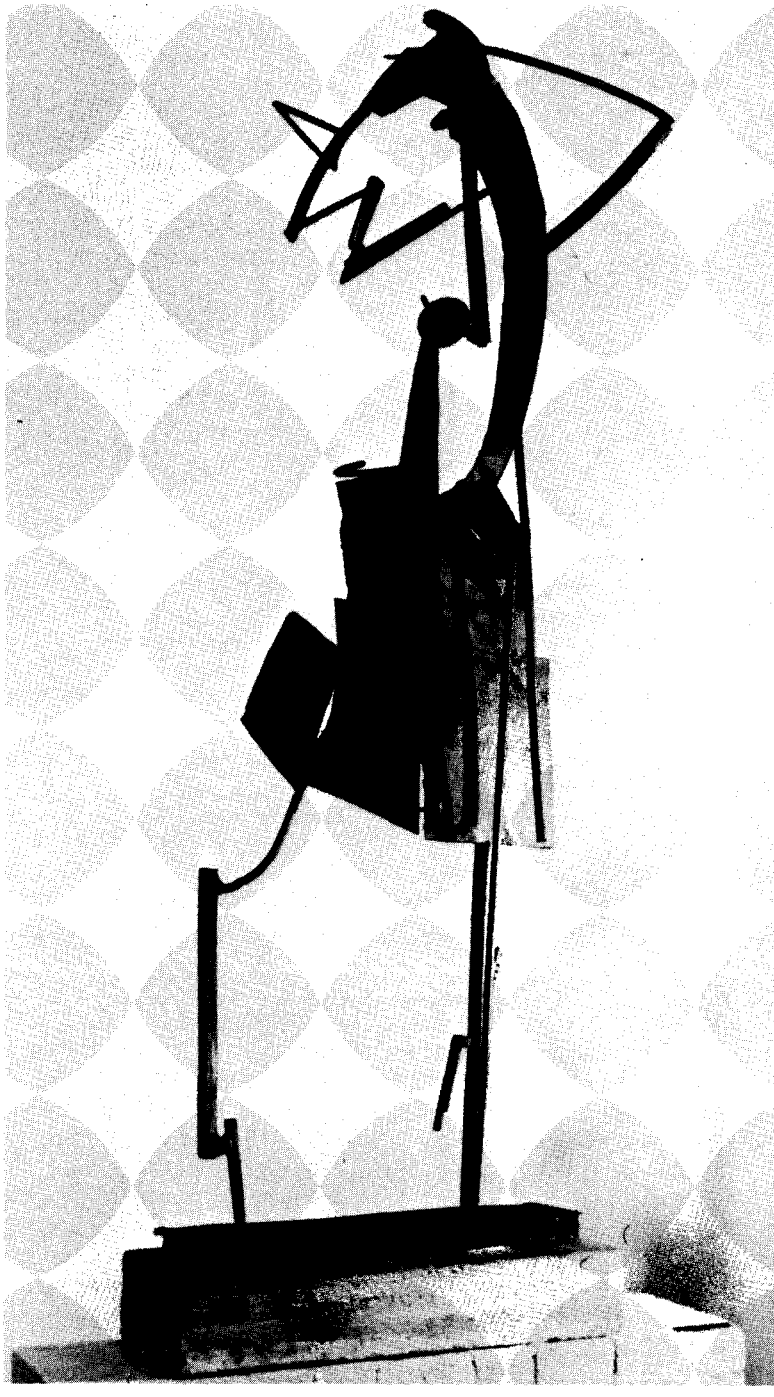

Woman Combing Her Hair (1931)
Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. Donated by Madame R. González.

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In 1928, Picasso availed himself of González' technical skill in order to realize the constructions he was then planning. This seems to have given the final and necessary impetus to González' own burgeoning desire to make sculpture. It is, therefore, not surprising to find similar work from the hands of both men, especially as they had known each other since before the turn of the century. In 1929–30, for example, González created a small figure of Don Quixote which was his first effort at an entirely linear sculpture standing free and open in space. It is a tour de force in that its forms are developed entirely to one side of the long diagonal of the spear that forms its anchor. When seen from the front—and it has a definable front—*Don Quixote*'s voids are contained within the linear pattern of its solids and one sees through it as if penetrating it. From other points of view, however, various bent and curving elements subvert that sense of containment, and it is in every way a more daring work than Gargallo's *Prophet* (1933), which it superficially resembles. It does, however, come remarkably close to Picasso's *Woman* (1930–2), a work that is at once freer and more conventional, with its curiously descriptive head. Even more striking is the similarity of González' *Woman Combing Her Hair* (c. 1931), the largest figure he had attempted up to that point, to Picasso's *Woman in the Garden* (1929–31). Both are elaborate arrangements of flat and linear forms raised on thin "legs." The differences in character between the two are instructive. While not González' most satisfying piece, *Woman* (see preceding page) is composed of comparatively few linear and planar elements which are arranged in a relatively orderly fashion. The three-dimensional drawing is especially suave around the head, and the piece varies in effect as one walks around it. The planes which give it bulk, when viewed from what can be thought of as the front, thin into lines as one progresses. Although the irregular edges of the planes tend to compete with the drawing of the linear elements, and the two thin legs that bring the piece into its base are a problem, González has avoided the pitfall of making the two right-angled planes that form the torso into a box. He does this structurally by not completing the shape at the back, and he has wit enough to do it visually by leaving parts of the weld joints open, so that one can see through what might otherwise read as a volume to the background space. Picasso's abandon, on the other hand, leads him to create a figure that is both cruder and more vigorous than González'. He overcomes the problem of legs in his *Woman* by having the construction touch the ground at several points, and his mingling of line and plane is more frantic, less contained and restrained. Although there are no suggestions of volume, Picasso incorporates an object (which reads as a solid) into his composition, the sensibility of which is less sympathetic, if stronger, than that of González.

The freedom and formal vocabulary that González derived from

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his contact with Picasso around 1930 apparently emboldened him to pursue various avenues of exploration to their logical conclusions. One such avenue led him to extreme reductivism. For example, *Mask, Light and Shadow* (c. 1932), composed of only two flat pieces of interlocked metal, exhibits an interest in planar reductivism. *Mane of Hair* (c. 1934), on the other hand, shows with how few lines González thought a sculpture could be made. Composed of an arc in the shape of half a heart, it is raised from its stone support on a small pin and topped with half a dozen paired linear elements by way of "mane." Allied to this reductivist trend is the continuing tendency of González' sculpture to be loosely organized and to open up in such a way that everything is visible. The result is a sculptural illusionism in which linear patterns suggesting depth are raised into the air in spidery configurations (these works no doubt deeply influenced the young David Smith). The masterpieces of this manner are *Woman Combing Her Hair* (c. 1934) and *Large Standing Figure* (c. 1935). Perhaps the best realized of González' pieces, *Woman Combing Her Hair* is raised up from its stone base on three parallel sheets of metal that turn into lines when seen from the side. *Woman* develops a linear pattern of straight and regularly curving elements whose harmonious counterpoint is at once palpable and insubstantial. How much the success of the piece depends on the suave and restrained regularity of its elements becomes clear when one compares it with the same subject treated some two years later. Here, in addition to the difficulties created by the volumes González uses, which anticipate certain uninterestingly decorative effects to be found in English sculpture of the 1950s, the squiggly lines fail to convince either separately as drawing or corporately as bulk or shape. The *Large Standing Figure* (see page 97) is even sparer in form than the first *Woman*. Its Spartan verticality is wittily punctuated by the disjunction of the small horizontal planes about halfway to its top and by the breaking of the wishbone shape further up. González has here created sculpture that is all space.

It is perhaps natural that González' spatial preoccupation should have led him not only to develop the kind of sculpture that was later to be called drawing in space, but also to explore interior space. Three "tunnel heads" from about 1932–34, two of them called *The Lovers*, may well have been suggested by the cone at the top of *Harlequin*. Each raises a cylinder, closed at one end by a hemisphere, on a planar or conical shape. Planes at the mouths of the cylinders read as silhouettes against the darkness of the interior, which becomes mysterious, if not threatening, because of its depth and containment (an effect enhanced by the hooded character of the heads). These efforts led González to further experiments in contained volume, or the appearance of contained volume, particularly in *Seated Woman I* (c. 1935) and *Seated Woman II* (1936). Both are assembled of elements that are essentially elongated boxes—

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those of the 1936 piece actually so, those of the earlier piece simulated in that the "boxes" have only two sides (the lack of complete closure is invisible from the front, however, and they function as boxes visually). The decorative thinness of these pieces contrasts strikingly with the substantiality of David Smith's *Albany* and *Menand* series, composed of almost identical elements that are solid—although Smith got into similar difficulties when he too tried to make sculpture from boxes, in the *Cubi*. González continued to have esthetic problems with closed shape, for instance in the second version of *Woman Combing Her Hair* and in the Brancusiesque *Cowled Head* (c. 1939). By 1937 he took steps to remedy the problem. In several pieces of that year, he built shapes out of planes joined at angles but not closed at the back. He emphasized their lack of volume by using greater than right angles, by turning complementary shapes that were clearly not volumes toward the beholder, or by leaving gaps in the weld joints through which space could be seen. These highly simplified pieces were the best of their type but, good as they could be, they never achieved either the inventiveness or the sheer quality of the more linear works.

González' difficulties with volumes were compounded when he tried to create representational pieces. As early as about 1930 he had used welded plates to make a small figure entitled *Woman with a Broom*, the decorative nature of which overwhelms its quality as sculpture. Although the slightly later *Woman with a Bundle of Sticks* is somewhat better because its figure is relatively planar and is contained within a strange planar architecture, the life-size constructed figure of Montserrat (1936–37) suffers in the same way. Volumetric sculpture was not González' forte, nor did his welding technique lend itself to creating convincing figures. González seems to have realized this and his late naturalistic sculpture, made in the early 1940s, is modeled and cast. Even then, his esthetic heart seems to have been elsewhere, and the war-related subjects of the pieces overwhelms them, much as it did similar efforts by Miró, Picasso, and others.

Three late efforts to integrate bulk and volume with linear and spatial concerns are at least partially successful, however, and suggest one of the influences that may have led González back to the object. *Woman with a Mirror* (c. 1937), *Cactus Man I* (1939), and *Cactus Man II* (1939–40) (see facing page) all have Surreal overtones in their combinations of human and vegetable references, in the strangely evocative nature of their forms, and in the juxtapositions of those forms. The largest piece of its kind González ever made, *Woman with a Mirror* raises an elaborate construction of thickened planes and lines, the lines arranged in the corolla and fork-like configurations that appear in more than one of González' late pieces, on a curious pod shape whose volume contrasts uncomfortably with the declarative substantiality of the other elements. In general,

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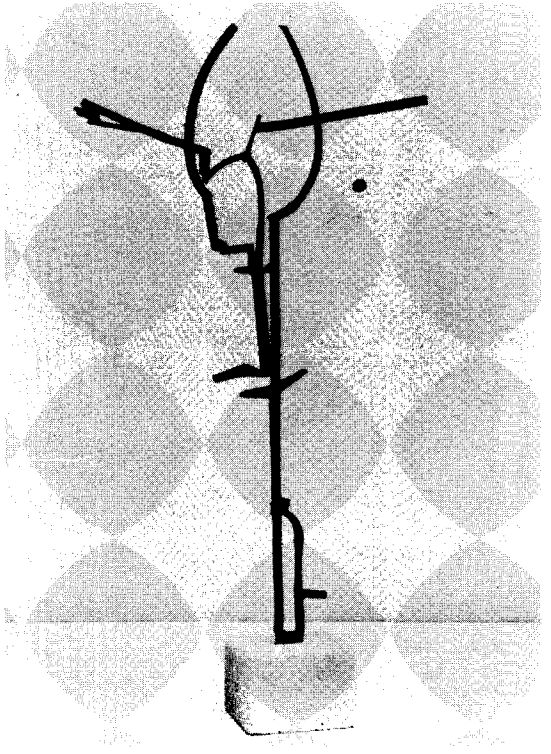
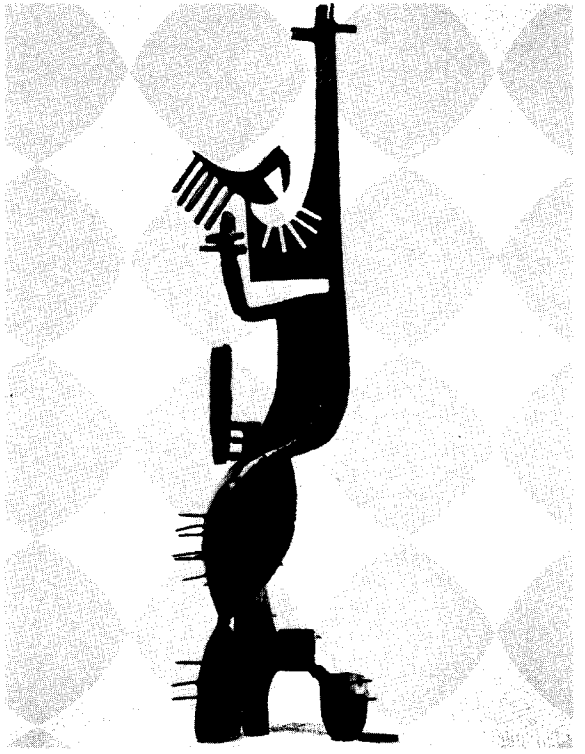


Large Standing Figure (1935)
Collection Foundation Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France.



Cactus Man Number Two (1939–40)
Purchase of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
Photograph courtesy of the Museum.

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Woman is more impressive for its ambitions than for the conviction with which those ambitions are realized. The Cactus Men are relatively more satisfactory—in part because their elements are more homogeneous and in part because the volumes of which they are composed are mitigated by the spines that project from them. This spatial distension helps tie the pieces together, making clear once again that González' genius was for the spatial sculpture he brought to such perfection. That sculpture laid the basis for much that followed it, most notably the accomplishment of David Smith. Possessed of an elegant and reticent sensibility projected in his work, González was neither a deeply original talent, a monumental sculptor, nor a protean figure like Picasso. He was, nonetheless, one of the most significant sculptors of the century. Recognizing which artistic ideas around him were most fertile, he had the inner force to pursue them to their logical conclusions. When it remains true to the character of its creator, the sculpture embodying those ideas is both beautiful and influential.

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ROBERT ASAHINA

The Real Stuff

On Broadway these days, disbelief is not so much suspended as it is propped up—with props. As soon as the curtain rose, it was clear that the main attraction of *La Cage Aux Folles* was not going to be Gene Barry and George Hearn, playing Georges and Albin, the homosexual lovers who are, respectively, the proprietor and the drag queen star of the eponymous cabaret. And after the first few bars of the opening number, it was also apparent that Jerry Herman's music and lyrics and Harvey Fierstein's book (based on Jean Poiret's play and the subsequent movie, a cult favorite) were not responsible for the SRO crowds at the Palace Theatre.

No, the real attraction was David Mitchell's set of Chinese boxes-within-boxes: a light-studded proscenium that broke in half, rotated, and turned into the exterior, the interior, and the backstage area of the nightclub, then into Georges and Albin's house, finally into the St. Tropez waterfront. While the sets were transmogrifying, the characters covered the intervening "distance" by walking in place, much like the "break dancers" who have become such a common and tiresome sight on big-city streets—or so I initially thought. I quickly realized, though, that the cast was not composed of mimes who could seem to stroll without making any progress. Once again, Mitchell deserved the credit, this time for crafting what appeared to be strips of flooring that could be moved backward at the same speed that pedestrians atop them moved forward.

The collective gasp that greeted each successive special effect rivaled the appreciation of moviegoers at, say, *Star Wars*. No doubt a great deal of the audience's reaction was a form of self-congratulation—an appropriate response, to be sure, on the part of theatergoers who had waited weeks to get tickets that were priced at $45, in order to defray the reported $5 million in capitalization. Even though *La Cage Aux Folles* wasn't any damn good, it was (in the fashionable advertising argot) the "Broadway sensation of the year." So acclaim was not so much earned as bought.

More important, the audience was reacting, though with perhaps less self-awareness, to a new mode of theatricality on Broadway. It could be called Hyper-realism, to distinguish it from its Super and Magic counterparts in contemporary painting and fiction. Better still, Idiot Realism, since its intent is not to represent but to replicate, not to engage the imagination (not even a little) but to coerce the senses. "You want to see a cabaret?" I can hear the producer, Allan Carr, asking. "We won't just make something that *looks* like a

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cabaret. We'll actually *build* one—right there on stage." Indeed, the sets could not have been more realistic, unless they were covered with dollar bills.

What is so odd is that this Idiot Realism should be in the service of a play that is supposed to be about artifice—about men pretending to be women, about lovers pretending to be just friends, about psychological truth that expresses itself in duplicity. *La Cage Aux Folles* should be theatrical in the most flamboyant way, its form matching its content. Instead, it is literal-minded to a terrifying degree.

Nothing in the play seems like anything except exactly what it is. "Les Cagelles," the drag princesses who accompany Albin, look like linebackers in tights. (It took me about ten seconds to pick out the two female ringers in the chorus, who are identified in the program.) Hearn looks like nothing more and nothing less than a middle-aged man in mascara. (Compare him to the "heroine" of Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, whose transformation is so shocking, and convincing, because it comes from within, not simply from a make-up kit.) Barry just looks middle-aged, a has-been television actor whose soft shoe routine is even harder for the audience to watch than it must be for him to execute.

Worst of all, the title and lyrics of Herman's big number, which brings down the first act curtain with a whimper, not a bang, have everything backward (which I should have anticipated in a show whose primary purpose apparently was to make transvestism palatable to the bridge-and-tunnel matinee set). "I am what I am," sings Albin defiantly, instead of proclaiming what you would expect from a self-respecting drag queen, confident of his/her non-identity: "I am what I am *not*."

I admit that *I* was not interested enough to stay for the second act. Nor would I have lasted past the intermission of Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*—except there wasn't one; it had only one act, stretched to the almost unbearable length of exactly ninety minutes.

That's right: *exactly* ninety minutes. I know; I timed it. So did everyone else at the John Golden Theatre—audience, cast, and crew. There was a big clock hanging conspicuously on the back wall of the single set, a "relatively new house built way out on a country road." In yet another deadening display of Idiot Realism, dramatic time matched real time as the timepiece ticked away till the end of the play—when a bell should have signaled (but didn't) our grateful escape from the theater.

With such a mechanical windup, the climax came as no surprise (nor was it supposed to), either to the audience or to the two characters, Jessie Cates (Kathy Bates) and her mother, Thelma Cates (Anne Pitoniak). *'night, Mother* takes the form of a debate between mother and daughter over Jessie's decision to commit suicide, but the outcome is rigged. Jessie is quietly determined, Thelma not so quietly deranged. While daughter is patiently cleaning a gun in

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preparation for the big bang finale, mother is prattling on inanely about hot chocolate, knitting, television, and a host of lowbrow concerns with which Norman has burdened her in order to let the audience know that this is a drama about Real People.

In keeping with one of the leading principles of Idiot Realism—that "too much ain't enough" (as the sign reads on the Lone Star cafe, across the street from my apartment in lower Manhattan)—Thelma is only one of the many crosses her daughter bears. Jessie is overweight and homely. Her father has died. Her son is a petty thief. Her husband has deserted her. And if all that were not enough, she also suffers from epilepsy, though (incredibly) no one ever told her about it while she was growing up.

In fact, her reasons for killing herself are so obvious and numerous that a coroner could cite sheer concatenation as the cause of death. (As if her mother's bad taste alone were not enough!) Such an overdetermined life (and death) is not worth examining, much less living—or dramatizing. The grinding inevitability of that clock is not so much tragic as pathetic, realism at its most unrealistic.

Somehow, *'night, Mother* won a Pulitzer Prize. I suppose the logic was to honor the playwright, not the play; Norman's previous work, *Getting Out*, was truly deserving. I have even heard *'night, Mother* hailed as a display of her range as a writer. But that strikes me a little like praising Reggie Jackson for his ability to hit long foul balls as well as home runs. When the range is from very good to very bad, I would like to see a somewhat smaller spread, with a lot more approaching the former than the latter.

I would also like to see a lot less of David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, which has been revived for the second time on Broadway, at the Booth Theatre. The play now stars Al Pacino as Teach, a low-life hustler, and J. J. Johnston (a member of the original off-Broadway cast) as Donny, the owner of the junkshop where all of the action, or rather all of the talking, takes place.

In the performance I saw, the last of the three characters, Bobby, a junkie/flunky, was played by James Hayden. A week later, Hayden was found dead of an overdose of heroin. Real life imitating realistic art? Perhaps, though I doubt that being strung out helps an actor remember his lines. Hayden was convincing despite, probably not because of, his addiction.

Unfortunately, the play seems less and less convincing as the years pass. When it was first produced at St. Clement's in 1976, *American Buffalo* was praised as, of all things, a critique of American capitalism. All the items littering Donny's store were taken as representing the detritus of our culture, while that eponymous nickel, a collector's item belonging to some off-stage numismatist, was supposed to be the catalyst for the acquisitiveness that poisons the relationship of Teach, Donny, and Bobby. They plan to steal the American buffalo (catch the symbolism?) but wind up cheating each other and themselves (get it?).

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Seven years later, it is obvious that *American Buffalo* is nothing but another variation on the tiresome theme of thieves falling out. You can tell it is a realistic play because every other word is an undeleted expletive, and because the ending is unhappy. But just once I would like to see some scummy characters pull off one of their petty schemes. Is success any more unrealistic than failure?

Idiot Naturalism is perhaps the best way to characterize Andrei Serban's production of *Uncle Vanya* at La Mama Annex, if only because of all that natural wood in Santo Loquasto's set. The cavernous Annex space was filled with a three-or-four-level arrangement of platforms, stairs, and runways across pits, constructed with no apparent purpose other than playing havoc with the sight lines and with the logic of the blocking. The characters wandered up and down, in and out, around pillars and across catwalks, carrying on conversations while leaning over railings or gazing up from below ground level.

If you can imagine a bunch of pre-Revolutionary Russians stoned out of their minds in a Malibu beach house, you can get a sense of what it was like to watch this production of Chekhov. The druglike quality was due in large part to the sheer incoherence of Serban's direction, which evidently consisted of simply telling the actors to do whatever they wanted to do, move wherever they wanted to move. (If he could have gotten away with having them say whatever they wanted to say, while still attributing their lines to Chekhov, I am sure Serban would have. In fact, he did the next best thing: he used a "new English version" of the play, by Jean-Claude van Itallie—who has admitted that he does not read Russian.) The result was a violent clash of styles suggesting that each performer was lost in his or her own pharmaceutically heightened universe.

Diane Venora played Yelyena with the kind of grand theatricality—sweeping gestures, exaggerated phrasing—that Chekhov repeatedly inveighed against. (*She* should have appeared in *La Cage Aux Folles*, a woman playing a man impersonating a woman, like Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria*.) As Serebryakov, James Cahill did a passable imitation of Dan Aykroyd (one of the old *Saturday Night Live* gang), flapping his arms like an insane stork and squawking like a rude chicken. Unfortunately, his goofy, gangly slapstick act had nothing to do with his part, the subtly mendacious and manipulative professor. Just as inappropriately, the unpleasant but nearly ubiquitous F. Murray Abraham (now on screen in *Scarface*) brought to the role of Dr. Astrov the same lack of charm he displayed as Dr. Dorn in Serban's unfortunately unforgettable production of *The Sea Gull* at the Public Theatre a few years ago. As the actor snarled and spat out his lines with amazing speed, I found it impossible to believe that the character had anything like the attraction he was supposed to have for women.

Special note has to be taken of Joseph Chaikin in the title role. Jerking spastically across the stage like one of the corpses in *Night of the Living Dead*, Chaikin was wildly out of control, oblivious even to

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whatever feeble constraints Serban might have imposed. Instead of the pathos of a wasted life, Chaikin's Vanya expressed the horror of a fried brain. Whether it belonged to the character or the actor, perhaps only Chaikin's sister, who played Nanny, was in a position to know.

What any of this mishmash of bad directing and worse acting has to do with Chekhov's brand of naturalism is hard to understand. But ever since it was translated from the Russian into English, The Method—which grips Serban and Chaikin alike—has come to mean the opposite of what it originally meant: naturalism has long since been transformed into Idiot Naturalism.

One refreshing alternative to the fifty-seven varieties of Idiocy now bottled on and off Broadway is Sam Shepard's version of naturalism in *Fool for Love*, at the Circle Repertory. For lack of a better term, it can be called Magic Realism, in honor not of the genre of writing or painting (though it likewise weds realistic form and surrealistic content) but of Martin Esslin's Magic Theatre in San Francisco, with which the playwright has long been associated.

Set in a cheap motel room somewhere in the Mojave desert, the drama proceeds along the familiar lines of recrimination leading to revelation, prompting further recriminations and further revelations. Andy Stacklin's gloriously sleazy furnishings, Ardyss L. Golden's wonderfully grungy costumes, the colloquial language, the kitchen-sink style of acting—all suggest at first that *Fool for Love* is another down-home drama about Real People.

But in his typical manner, Shepard quickly launches the play into the realm of the fantastic, though all the while grounding it in the poetic imagery, visual and verbal, of the mundane. May (Kathy Whitton Baker) and Eddie (Ed Harris) are trapped together, perhaps voluntarily, in that remote motel. They are lovers, but also—maybe—half-siblings. Perhaps May is waiting for another man, Martin (Dennis Ludlow); perhaps Eddie is running from another woman (the unseen Countess). Perhaps not. Maybe the Old Man (Will Marchetti) sitting off to the side of the stage is the father of both of them, maybe not. Sometimes he is an invisible spectator to their interaction, sometimes an active participant in it.

"I want to show you something," he remarks to Eddie, pointing to an imaginary picture on the opposite wall. "Barbara Mandrell [the country singer]. That's who that is. . . . That's realism. I am actually married to Barbara Mandrell in my mind." Later, May tells Eddie: "I can't even see you. All I see is a picture of you. You and her [the Countess]. I don't even know if the picture's real any more. I don't even care. It's a made up picture." "Why should I believe it this time?" she asks still later. "Because it's true," he replies. "It was supposed to have been true every time before," she complains. "Every other time. Now it's true again."

This is not, however, merely *Rashomon*-like relativity, though Shepard does consistently undercut every expectation that he so carefully establishes, as both writer and director. As *Fool for Love*

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progresses, it is clear that May and Eddie are participating in a familiar ritual of desire and despair that has enthralled them for a long time. "We'll always be connected," he says. "That was decided a long time ago." "Nothing was decided!" she retorts. "You made that all up."

But making it up is the essence of their relationship. "Lying's when you believe it's true," Eddie proclaims. "If you already know it's a lie, then it's not lying." The point is not truth, but drama. Each re-enactment gives the lovers a chance to rekindle the lust that consumes them. First May is contemptuous of Eddie; the next moment she can barely keep her hands off him. Then she kisses him passionately, only to knee him in his groin seconds later.

And from desire to revulsion and back again, each re-enactment gives them the opportunity to dramatize themselves, to recreate themselves over and over again. "I thought you were supposed to be a fantasist, right?" the Old Man asks Eddie. "Isn't that basically the deal with you? You dream things up. Isn't that true?" Most of all, what Eddie and May dream up is different versions of their past, separate and shared. "How many times have you done this to me?" May asks Eddie. "Suckered me into some dumb little fantasy." It's both dumb and fantastic: characters who exist because they perform a ritual.

For an audience, it should be noted. Not us, the ticket holders in our seats, but the Old Man, off to the side. The stage directions in the published version of *Fool for Love* confirm my supposition (which was not shared, incidentally, by most reviewers) that the Old Man "exists only in the minds of May and Eddie." It is only because they see themselves through his eyes that they can be performing at all instead of just existing for our sake. And it is because of *their* awareness of being on their own stage that *we* are aware of the theatricality of their lives. We see them "living" on stage not for us, but for themselves.

This is the essence of Shepard's Magic Realism: the theatricality of the mundane. In *Fool for Love*, Shepard reveals the essential, and paradoxical, *artificiality* of naturalism. It is a mode of drama like any other, something that the practitioners of Idiot Realism forget. And it is by no means a "transparent" mode; its conventions are simply not often enough acknowledged as such.

A play does not become more realistic as its sets and effects become more realistic. Just the opposite, frequently. Unlike movies, which can go a long way toward convincing us of the reality of what they represent (monsters, space ships), plays work best on the mind, not the senses—or on the mind *through* the senses. The more the pains taken and the more the money spent on a production, the more conscious we are that what we are seeing is not the real thing but something that *looks* like it, an artificial product bought with dollars, not a work created by art. This is how Idiot Realism undermines itself. But as Shepard understands, and as Fierstein understood in *Torch Song Trilogy* but not in *La Cage Aux Folles*, what is most real on stage is what you cannot see.

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MARVIN MUDRICK

The Man of Sentiment

HALFWAY THROUGH THIS VOLUME[1] Maurice Cranston describes Rousseau arriving in Paris for the first time: it's 1742, Rousseau is already thirty years old, penniless, unknown; by deeds or prospects nothing like a hero, yet full of "hopes for glory and fortune . . . like the hero of a picaresque novel with his little bundle at the gates of the metropolis." The volume ends twelve years later when Rousseau comes back to Paris very pleased with himself after a winner-take-all summer in his birthplace, Geneva, where he has been fêted and lionized like the restored prodigal and conquering hero of many an eighteenth-century picaresque novel. Cranston promises a second volume to cover the rest of Rousseau's life, which, if he sticks to the evidence as conscientiously as he does here, will be a chilling sequel in which everybody except posterity disowns our hero and turns him out into exile and his winter of discontent, where at length he dwindles and dies; but in Volume One the inextinguishable hero is all over the map with adventures hot and heavy till his crowning triumph against all odds at long last. (Maybe Cranston should have published the second volume first, and promised us this happy ending with the publication of the upcoming Volume One.)

Certainly nobody's life more nearly resembles a picaresque novel, by external appearances anyhow, than Rousseau's from his birth in 1712 through his perfect summer of 1754. His mother "belonged to the society of high Geneva"—Cranston's way of reminding us that the Geneva elite had their residences in the geographically upper part of town—but she married an artisan (picaresque heroes are classless or declassed or of ambiguous class): she died of childbed fever a week after Rousseau was born; at the age of ten he was abandoned by his father who, having decamped from Geneva to avoid the judicial penalties for a brawl he had incited, never bothered to reclaim his sons (Rousseau had an older brother) but "found refuge in Bernese territory at Nyon," where he married again and settled into "a peaceful existence on the income of his first wife's estate"; meanwhile the ten-year-old became the ward of his maternal uncle, who "looked down on him as the child of the artisan quarter of St. Gervais" (the part of town into which, after his first wife's death, Isaac Rousseau had been forced for economic reasons to descend from the fine house in the hills that Suzanne Ber-

[1] JEAN-JACQUES: The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1712–1754, by *Maurice Cranston*. Norton. $22.45.

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nard had brought to the marriage). Then followed thirty-two years of adventures foreign and domestic: life among strangers in strange places; guardians and teachers, kindly women and pastoral moments, apprenticeship, a brutal master, flight, vicissitudes and upheavals, kindly women, periods of apparent homing in, periods of restless motion, dangers, getaways, kindly women, changes of vocation, changes of religion, ins and outs and ups and downs—culminating with explosive unexpectedness in acceptance, general applause, and that Geneva summer of "unblemished success" (Cranston's term: most of Rousseau's successes were blemished by his own crotchetiness if nothing else).

As a series of events it could hardly be closer to The History of Tom Jones a Foundling; or the history of Lazarillo de Tormes; or of Gil Blas, like Rousseau a *de facto* orphan adopted by his maternal uncle, but the resemblance fails when Gil Blas describes his uncle as "an ecclesiastic . . . [who] of course thought of nothing but good living, I mean in the flesh as well as in the spirit"—because for Gil Blas or any other picaresque hero the world from his first sight of it makes its own rules, is vivid and entertaining all by itself, invites him into it by parading its comic discrepancies. Not for Rousseau, though, who from the first had different and clammier views: in the *Confessions* he observes that, having been lent a copy of *Gil Blas* at nineteen, "I read it with pleasure, but I was not yet mature enough for such reading; I wanted sentimental novels." Nor did the anticipated maturity ever arrive: adventures could never fill his cup; he ought to have been the picaresque hero to the life, but he was a solemn sort, and the world was less thrilling to him than the precious sensibility that kept him from paying much attention to it. Rousseau would rather have been, what many years later he made himself, the hero of a sentimental novel: his *Confessions* no less, in which, as when he sentimentally misrepresents his runaway father, the world needed touching up here and there, and in which occasionally he slips on a banana peel—e.g. when his father died "I was too preoccupied just then to feel bereavement as I would have done in other circumstances"; or, when Diderot was imprisoned, "if . . . [his confinement] had continued to be as rigorous as at first, I think that I would have died of despair at the foot of that accursed keep." Thank God Diderot was made more comfortable, because otherwise we wouldn't have the *Confessions* or indeed Rousseau's whole *oeuvre*, because Diderot's imprisonment occurred in 1749 and Rousseau hadn't yet written even the First Discourse. Cranston's biography clears the air, it's an unsentimental account of the man who invented sentiment ("Oh, how sweet are the tears of joy and affection, and how my heart feasts on them!"), it's a new look at a very difficult genius, above all in its unimpeachably documented corrections of Rousseau's frequent sentimental misrepresentations and memory lapses in the professedly let-it-all-hang-out-and-damn-the-consequences *Confessions*. It allows us to conclude that Rousseau never

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got over his preference for sentimental novels (to the catalogue of which, a few years after the events of this volume, he contributed the moistest and most influential of all merely fictional sentimental novels, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*); it doesn't dissuade us from concluding that after all these years the charm he exerted on many of his most distinguished contemporaries escapes us; or that, ultimately, not only Rousseau but France and all of Western civilization would have been better off if in addition to Gil Blas's adventures he had had something of Gil Blas's zest for the world and sense of humor.

Rousseau is one of the world's geniuses, and one of the least attractive. He repels and puts off, not so much because he developed from a touchy and unamiable young man into a middle-aged misanthrope and paranoiac as because, whether in a sentimental novel or a pamphlet of speculative anthropology or a treatise on education, however ingratiating he sometimes wishes to be, he can't resist preempting the breathing space of others, their right to resist him, their right to be whatever they would obstinately have continued to be if he hadn't shown up in the nick of time to claim and absorb them. The unlikeliest affinity in cultural history, till boggled minds pull themselves together and look into it, is Tolstoy's with Rousseau: the last realist's lifelong infatuation with the first romantic—"Rousseau hasn't had justice done to him," said Tolstoy in old age; "I have read all of Rousseau, yes, all twenty volumes, including the *Dictionary of Music*. I did better than admire him; I made a true cult of him." (Tolstoy isn't mentioned by Cranston, to whom I offer this quotation for his second volume.) But Tolstoy the brilliant young writer must have adored the *Confessions* for their brilliance and originality and the kind of psychological daring that he himself tried to emulate as early as in his own autobiographical books; and quite like Rousseau he darkly suspected that he was all heart. Furthermore, aristocrat-landowner Tolstoy a decade or so later, assuming as his personal responsibility the education of the peasant children on his estate, must have adored the creator of *Émile*, who laid down the law—which Tolstoy took as gospel—that children were free spirits who could be educated freely in only one unappealable way, the meticulously spelled-out right way, his and nobody else's: "Education," wrote Tolstoy with Rousseau behind him, "is the tendency toward moral despotism raised to a principle"; and, despite the unprecedented common sense of many of their pedagogic methods, both he and Rousseau proved unintentionally over and over again that the aphorism applied to themselves as well as to all the others. Finally, the old crank Tolstoy must have adored the old crank Rousseau, who had already proved a century earlier that everybody else was wrong about politics, economics, diet ("the taste for meat is unnatural," asserts Rousseau in *Émile*, and, if you're still in doubt, "Great criminals prepare themselves for murder by drinking blood"), that having looked into his heart he had lo! located there the lowdown on society ("man is by nature good . . . but depraved

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and perverted by society") and history and philosophy and religion. Young or old, carnivorous or vegetarian, Tolstoy always found something in Rousseau to sustain and vindicate his unsparing preoccupation with himself.

The *Confessions* is a great and astonishing book of self-disclosure, spoiled (whenever it is) mainly by the presence of its author. One of the best moments concerns a young Basque, Ignacio Emanuel de Altuna, whom Rousseau met in Venice and whose apartment he shared later in Paris:

> Outwardly he was devout in the Spanish fashion, but in his heart he was of an angelic piety. . . . He never inquired after anyone's religious opinions. It scarcely mattered to him whether his friend was a Jew, a Protestant, a Turk, a bigot, or an atheist, provided he was an honest man. Stubborn and headstrong over matters of small importance, once religion or morality came into the question he drew back, kept quiet, or simply said: "I am responsible only for myself." It is incredible that so exalted a mind could also show such exaggeratedly strict attention to detail. He apportioned his day in advance by the hour, the quarter, and the minute, dividing it among his various pursuits, and kept so scrupulously to his plan that if the hour struck while he was reading a sentence he shut his book without finishing it. Of these periods of time, thus laid out, some were devoted to one study, some to another; and there were some for reflection, conversation, and divine service, for Locke, for telling his beads, for visits, for music, and for painting. No pleasure or temptation or consideration was allowed to upset his arrangements; only a duty to be fulfilled might do so. As he gave me the list of his periods, so that I should conform to them, I began by laughing; but I ended with tears of admiration. He never disturbed anyone, nor allowed himself to be disturbed; and he was abrupt with people whose courtesies he found a nuisance. He was hot-tempered, but not sulky. I have often seen him in a rage, but never irritated. He had the gayest possible disposition; he could take a joke and loved making one; indeed he shone in this respect, and had a talent for epigrams. When provoked, he was noisy and loud-voiced, and his words carried. But while he was shouting one could see him smile; and in the midst of his excitement some humorous phrase would occur to him, which would set everyone laughing. He was not phlegmatic like a Spaniard, nor had he a Spanish complexion. His skin was fair, his cheeks red, and his hair a light chestnut. He was big and well-made, with a body that was a fit habitation for his mind.

The ellipsis in the second line of this lovely and touching eulogy stands for the one sentence omitted from the quotation: "Except for myself, he is the only tolerant man I have known in all my life"—which drops like a lead balloon less because of the fatuous

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self-reference than because Rousseau doesn't understand that the character of his friend (who was lost to Rousseau when he went back to Spain and died young), magnanimously as he represents and understands it, is light-years beyond his own. Rousseau adds: "This wise heart and wise head was a good judge of men, and became my friend; and that is sufficient answer for those who are not"; but, though it's a noble answer, it's not a sufficient one.

The very best episode is probably the only one in which Rousseau quite surrenders to its logic and, still disclosing himself like crazy, recedes without argument into second billing to somebody else: Giulietta, the beautiful prostitute (also in Venice), who almost gives him his only experience of categorical sensuality—"a dazzling young person . . . as charming as she was lively, a brunette of twenty at the most": " 'Listen, Gianetto,' she said to me, 'I do not want to be loved in the French fashion. Indeed, it would be of no use. The moment you are bored, go. But do not stop half-way, I warn you.' "

> Do not attempt to imagine the charms and graces of that enchanting girl. You would not come near to the truth. Young virgins in the cloisters are not more fresh, seraglio beauties are not so sportive, the houris of paradise are less enticing. Never was such sweet pleasure offered to mortal heart and senses. Alas, had I only known how to enjoy it fully and completely for a single second! I savored it, but without enchantment. I dulled all its delights. I killed them as if on purpose. No, Nature has not made me for sensual delight. She has put the hunger for it in my heart, but what might be ineffable pleasure turns to poison in my wretched head.

—this unappeasable head (which thinks it's all heart) which thinks and thinks and can't stop thinking: "Great men and princes should be her slaves; scepters should lie at her feet"; but she's "a wretched streetwalker on sale to the world." (Not that he's worried about catching something: "The freshness of her flesh, the brightness of her coloring, the whiteness of her teeth, the sweetness of her breath, the air of cleanliness that pervaded her person, so completely banished that idea from my mind that, being still in doubt about my own health since my visit to the *padoana*, I even felt some qualms about my not being wholesome enough for her.") So he grows cold, and Giulietta is "momentarily at a loss"; but a little encouragement from her revives him till, "about to sink upon a breast which seemed about to suffer a man's lips and hand for the first time,"

> I perceived that she had a malformed nipple. I bent my brow, looked harder, and made certain that this nipple did not match the other. Then I started wondering about the reason for this malformation. I was struck by the thought that it resulted from some remarkable imperfection of Nature and, after turning this

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> idea over in my head, I saw as clear as daylight that instead of the most charming creature I could possibly imagine I held in my arms some kind of monster, rejected by Nature, men, and love. I carried my stupidity so far as to speak to her about her malformed nipple. First she took the matter as a joke and said and did things in her skittish humor that were enough to make me die of love. But as I still felt some remnant of uneasiness, which I could not conceal from her, I finally saw her blush, adjust her clothes, and take her place at the window, without a word. I tried to sit down beside her. She moved and sat down on a couch, then got up the next moment and walked about the room, fanning herself. Finally she said to me in a cold and scornful voice: "Gianetto, lascia le donne, e studia la matematica [Johnny, give up the ladies and study mathematics]."

Still, Rousseau was being unfair to himself here: it wasn't only his mind that got him into trouble. He might well have spoken, with Pope, of "this long disease, my life"; already during his stay in Venice in 1743–44 he was beginning to suffer from the urethral malfunction that would worsen as the years passed. In his will, written in 1763, he noted: "My retentions of urine are not at the point of access as in stone, where one either micturates through an open channel or not at all. My disease is a chronic state. I never micturate through an open channel, and the urine is never totally suppressed; the passage is always more or less blocked without at any time being entirely free, with the result that I suffer a discomfort, an almost ceaseless need that I can never satisfy." When in 1752 his opera *Le Devin du village* (Rousseau was a self-taught musician with a knack for composing folklike pretty tunes) had a huge success and the King sent for him, Rousseau declined the invitation (and angered the King) because by then "he needed constant access to a chamber pot. Already, during the performance at the royal theater, the impossibility of retiring to urinate had caused him much suffering; and he dreaded the prospect of having to stand wriggling foolishly amid a throng of courtiers waiting for the King to arrive. He knew that withdrawal would not be allowed and he blushed at the thought of wetting his breeches in such august surroundings. 'This infirmity,' he explains [in the *Confessions*], 'was the chief reason for my keeping away from society; and it prevented my even being in a room with ladies behind closed doors.' " The last sentence seems to be contradicted by much that he says and doesn't say in many other parts of the *Confessions*: his activities, public as well as private, don't seem to have been curtailed nearly as drastically as it suggests; he's not the most trustworthy reporter on his own misfortunes; but there's no doubt that he was often painfully afflicted, and that he had more reasons that those inside his wretched head for giving up the ladies—though he never did—and studying mathematics.

Rousseau couldn't stop thinking, but the thinking wasn't of an

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Aristotelian or Lockean or mathematical sort, it was far more likely to consist in eccentric sallies of the imagination—of which, as he said, he had an excess—to the farthest implications of a feeling, a suspicion, an intuition he suddenly had that he was sure nobody else had ever had and that therefore must be true for everybody else as well as himself. If in a moment of inspiration or spite he decided to believe that the arts and sciences had done more harm than good—perhaps he decided to believe it because at the time his friends and associates on the great *Encyclopedia* believed the reverse and the whole Enlightenment of which they were the most illustrious representatives was founded on their belief—if it came to him in a flash that modern civilization was bad, then the next thing to do was to dismantle modern civilization:

> He asserts without reservation that science is evil in its origins and harmful in its effects. Every branch of science, he says, is rooted in some vice, arithmetic in avarice, mechanics in ambition, physics in idle curiosity. Other branches of learning spring from corresponding moral defects. If men were not unjust, they would have no use for jurisprudence; and history is the consequence of wars and conspiracies and tyrannies. The Baconian dream of improving man's life on earth by creating material abundance, Rousseau condemns as a culpable craving for luxury; and luxury, he says, is not a simple evil but one which has always been recognized by the wisest men as an especially corrupting evil. Frugality, he claims, is good for both the state and the individual, while luxury undermines nations just as it undermines men. Rousseau invites the reader to compare the fortunes of Sybaris with those of Sparta; whereas a handful of peasants defeated the Sybarites, the Spartans became the terror of Asia. . . .
>
> In thus condemning luxury, Rousseau also condemns the whole culture of rich and advanced societies: he depicts Athens as a seat of politeness and taste, a city of poets and orators, with buildings as elegant as its literature; and he argues that precisely because Athens was a model of high culture, it was a model also of vice and corruption. As for the supposed glories of Athenian philosophy, Rousseau simply notes that Socrates was forced to drink hemlock and he quotes the authority of Plato for saying that empirical knowledge is not true knowledge and that artists ought to be banished from a just republic. . . .

Of course Rousseau doesn't add that Socrates or Plato wouldn't have lasted five minutes on any Spartan street corner or grove of academe; moreover, if he had read Thucydides or his beloved Plutarch with a scintilla of understanding, he would have learned that Sparta was an armed camp of timid brutes who even after all the years of trying would never have beaten the civilized and resourceful Athenians in battle on land or sea if Athens hadn't suffered a

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series of defections and treacheries and a visitation of plague; but, when Rousseau was launched on the wings of his latest denunciatory thesis, he had risen out of sight of mere fact. It was this *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* that turned Rousseau overnight into a European celebrity, a philosopher, a master of reason; but toward the end of it, having exhausted the unreasonable uses of reason, he doesn't hesitate to advise prayer (there's no point in not having things both ways): "Rousseau becomes almost frenzied, suggesting that the future development of modern culture will finally prompt men—unless they are even more foolish than the present generation—to beg God to deliver them from science: ' "Give us back our innocence, ignorance, and poverty," will be their prayer, "for that alone can make us happy and precious in Thy sight." ' " When the inevitable counterattacks from godly as well as ungodly started appearing in print, Rousseau not only didn't back off, he moved in for the kill: "among the savages the love of their fellows and the concern for their common defense are bonds that unite them; the word 'property,' which costs our honest people so many crimes, has hardly any meaning to them. . . . The first source of evil is inequality. From the inequality came wealth, for those words 'rich' and 'poor' are relative, and wherever men were equal there were no rich or poor. From wealth was born luxury and idleness. From luxury the fine arts were born. From idleness the sciences were born." The "honest people" of France, burdened beyond reason with their superannuated feudal monarchy, were a receptive audience for such shocking revelations.

And Rousseau was coming on like gangbusters. A few years later he produced his second discourse, entitled *On the Origins of Inequality,* in which now he concentrated his fire on the institution of property and on social or economic or political hierarchy of any sort, and which such diverse commentators as Edmund Burke, Napoleon, and Hegel considered a major if not the immediate cause of the French Revolution. According to Rousseau, men "in the first state of nature were simple beings with no language, very little capacity for thought, with few needs and . . . few passions: 'since savage man desires only the things which he knows and knows only the things of which the possession is either within his power or easily obtained, then nothing should be so tranquil as his soul or so limited as his mind.' " Language itself was the first sign of deterioration. Primitive man needed no language because, in Rousseau's idyllic vision of an indefinite series of pre-linguistic pajama parties, "having neither houses nor huts, nor possessing property of any sort, everyone depended on chance for his lodging, and often slept only one night in any one place; males and females united fortuitously, in accordance with encounters, opportunities, and desires. They required no speech to interpret the things they had to say to each other; and they separated with the same ease" ("ridiculous supposition," says Voltaire's admirably restrained marginal note in his copy

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of the *Discourse*). Language developed when, having begun to fancy the notion of their own permanent dwellings (the first fatal notion on the road to the concept of property), hitherto solitary individuals set up light housekeeping, amalgamated into families and communities, and had to find something to say. But this "nascent society" was still rather idyllic and individuals were still free and equal; it was only "from the moment that one man needed the help of another, and it was realized that it would be useful for one man to have enough supplies for two, [that] equality disappeared; property was introduced, work became a necessity, and vast forests were transformed into smiling fields which had to be watered with the sweat of human beings, fields where slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops. . . . It is iron and wheat which have civilized men and ruined the human species." War is caused by inequality, "by 'the usurpations of the rich and the brigandage of the poor.' War begins in society when the idea of property is born and one man claims as his own what another man's hunger prompts him to seize." What's more, peace and social order are the result of a swindle practiced by the rich on the poor, who, agreeing to a "system of positive law," don't understand that "they are transforming existing possessions into permanent legal property, and so perpetuating their own poverty as well as the wealth of the rich." Not much can be said for ambition either: "the burning desire to have ourselves talked about, the yearning for distinction, which nearly always keeps us outside ourselves, is responsible for what is best and worst among men, responsible for our virtues and our vices, for our sciences and our mistakes, for our conquerors and our philosophers; responsible, in short, for a multitude of bad things and a very few good ones"—on which "how you condemn yourself!" is Voltaire's accurate annotation. When Voltaire had read the *Discourse* through, he wrote to Rousseau: "I have received, sir, your new book against the human race, and I thank you. No one has employed so much intelligence to turn us men into beasts. One starts wanting to walk on all fours after reading your book. However, in more than sixty years I have lost the habit."

Cranston is so respectful of all the evidence, con as well as pro, about Rousseau that it's puzzling that he maintains so high and steady a regard for him. It's less puzzling that, as Rousseau's champion, he dislikes Voltaire, to whose "malice" against Rousseau he refers on several occasions. But sometimes malice to one is wit to another; and Voltaire began to be witty in earnest at Rousseau's expense only after Rousseau had made clear his opposition to Voltaire's philosophical meliorism and humanitarian activities (Rousseau's reaction to the catastrophic Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was to write Voltaire a letter putting the blame on civilization because, if the inhabitants hadn't been congregated in a big city, the destruction wouldn't have amounted to very much at all). Rousseau made equally clear his personal animosity toward Voltaire, which burst all

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rational bounds in his notorious letter to Voltaire of June 17, 1760: "In short, I hate you"—alleging that Voltaire, who lived close to Geneva, had poisoned the minds of the Genevese against him and made it impossible for him ever to return there; but the allegation was pure fantasy, and Voltaire regretfully and accurately concluded that Rousseau had gone round the bend.

At any rate Rousseau had by this time not only abandoned but repudiated the Enlightenment, and had more or less inadvertently prepared the way for the Great Revolution (which would set everything right and prohibit earthquakes) whose aim was to vindicate and fulfill the Enlightenment but whose effect was to call it into everlasting question if not to discredit it altogether. He was the outsider and the hanging judge of his great century; he didn't fit into the picaresque adventures of his life any more comfortably than he fitted into the age that was their appropriate setting. Meanwhile, mad or merely prophetic, he was also a fine-tuned one-man early-warning system, anticipating and defining the aesthetic and cultural preoccupations of the next century:

> It is instructive . . . to notice Rousseau's response to Poussin's painting of the Great Flood. Unlike Poussin's earlier paintings of Biblical scenes, this remarkable picture, now hanging in the Louvre, possesses none of that classical repose which is the ideal of seventeenth-century aesthetics, but achieves effects of heightened emotion which painters of a later generation strove for. It depicts nature in angry colors; under blackening, stormy skies, swirling waters engulf the human figures in the foreground struggling in vain to escape their doom. It is a profoundly disturbing painting. . . .
>
> "There is only one picture that has ever affected me in my life," Rousseau once said. "It is Poussin's painting of the Great Flood. I looked at it for a whole hour and could not leave it even though it filled my soul with the most intense bitterness. I could feel the whole of nature suffering there. I had it for a long time in front of my eyes. Oh, I could not stay in a room with that painting: I should be overcome by a mortal sadness."

Nature (never mind the human figures in the foreground) becomes here the paradoxical and Christian image of a wrathful and suffering God; and "the more Rousseau came to associate nature with the ideas of God, the more he responded to those forms of nature which were most mighty, most awesome, most imposing in their majesty. Already at Chambéry, in the pre-Alps, he could say of himself: 'Flat country, however beautiful it might be, has never seemed beautiful to me. I must have torrents, rocks, pine trees, black forests, mountains, steep paths to climb and descend, precipices around all to make me feel fear.' "

Well, if you're unable to "enjoy fully and completely for a single second" the "charms and graces" of a woman as "enchanting" as Giulietta, the biggest thrill available to you is probably fear.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

Recombinative Poetry

IF POETS TODAY ARE UP TO ANYTHING it may be this: recombinations of traditional strategies (or impulses) that define anew our relationships to timeless subjects—love, death, isolation, God and His godless double, anxiety, fear. Whether the poets know it or not, this recombinant impulse has its roots in what happened to narrative after the epic tradition waned.

Nearly twenty years ago, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg[1] called our attention to narrative's post-epic division into two antithetical types: *empirical*, or realistic, narrative; and *fictional*, or idealistic, narrative. Furthermore, these branches could be subdivided: empirical narrative into the *historical* and the *mimetic*; fictional narrative into the *romantic* and the *didactic*. Though Scholes and Kellogg employed this framework to arrive ultimately at an explication of the modern novel, its application also provides a compelling historical context for reading contemporary poetry. It is clear, to this reader, that the narrative types, or recombinations of them, listed above are everywhere present and necessary in the volumes I will consider here.

Believe this and you must believe, as I do, that all poetry begins with a narrative impulse. That is not to say that all poetry—even all good poetry—is narrative. The popular contemporary essay-inverse demonstrates that the above types can be recombined so that narrative vanishes altogether. Like other strategies, this is sometimes successful, sometimes not. Recognition of this recombinant impulse, more than anything else, provides the key to unlock what is happening in contemporary poetry. It allows us to reject the application to poetry of erroneous popular labels like *formlessness* and *chaos*. It encourages us to see the work itself. Informed scrutiny of an individual text will enable a reader to make judgments, but the reader must be aware of the larger historical context in which the text inevitably exists. Awareness of this context sweeps the reader far beyond snap judgments and personal bias and enhances appreciation.

George Hitchcock's *The Wounded Alphabet*[2] collects poems written over the last thirty years. The problem confronting an audience is this—how does one read this unique practitioner? For decades his own poems and the character of *Kayak*, the magazine he edits, have

[1] *The Nature of Narrative*, Oxford University Press.

[2] THE WOUNDED ALPHABET: Poems Collected and New, 1953–1983, by *George Hitchcock*. Jazz Press/Papa Bach Editions. $9.95p.

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been readily associated with Surrealism. The kinship is accurate but is only part of the story. To make more of it is to label the poems (and the magazine for that matter) and fail to come completely to terms with them.

I would be one of the last reviewers to swaddle these poems in narrative lace, but I am confident in making the assertion that romantic, didactic, and mimetic impulses recombine in their composition. Surrealism, of course, is the form assumed by the romantic impulse, but the dominant impulse is mimetic. Hitchock's poems are rooted in the present and owe allegiance not to truth of fact but to truth of sensation and environment. It is a poetry of mood and nuance and requires of the reader an ability to negotiate associative leaps between paradoxical images. Experimental yet firmly traditional, it is a poetry of wit, musicality, and atmosphere.

The atmosphere in Hitchcock's poems alternates between an almost dandified high society and back alley, as in "Solitaire":

> all that winter you were gone
> the skylarks went on crutches
> I woke up every dawn
> to crows quarreling in ditches
>
> I'd been there before I knew
> that landscape of demented kings
> I'd seen the courtiers in blue
> masks and idiot posturings
>
> When you're nailed to a scar
> you don't care for fine words
> the juggler at the bazaar
> or the chap who eats swords
>
> the world's deceptive—too many
> crafty smiling bones
> eyes masquerading in money
> and loquacious spoons
>
> so I say goodbye to the foxtrot
> and to badminton in the park
> I shuffle the deck and deal out
> snowflakes in the dark

The form of this poem and words like "courtiers," "bazaar," and "chap" are almost dandified expressions; "crutches," "ditches," and "idiot posturings" spring from a didactic impulse and are pure back alley. Though social awareness and psychological insight abound in this book, this reader is most impressed by Hitchcock's generosity while striving to represent his subjects accurately. His poems are

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adept at spotlighting the suffering in joy, the joy at the climax of suffering. Readers of this collection will enter the presence of one of a kind.

> a flight of ladders
> loping over the veldt with
> awkward though leisurely paces
> is a noteworthy sight
> "The Ladder"

Indeed. *The Wounded Alphabet* presents an opportunity for many to get to know the work of this noteworthy poet.

It seems an odd time for Jon Anderson and Albert Goldbarth to be bringing out *new and selected* volumes of poetry. Both are in early mid-career. Surely both will produce additional volumes. I can't help wondering about books possibly lost in the transition these poets had to make from a cultivating to a harvesting state of mind. I can't help wondering about the voice asserting that less may be more, but more is really better. Is it?

Jon Anderson's *The Milky Way*[3] begins with twenty-one new poems, then backtracks to 1968. From there the three University of Pittsburgh press volumes are chronologically (and liberally) represented. It is delightful, in spite of my reservations about many of the new poems, to be able to read so much Anderson at once. His poetry always employs romantic and historical impulses and is forever on edge—like a movie star's profile, in which the subject appears remotely menacing behind a five o'clock shadow. More than any contemporary poet I can think of, Anderson lyrically and obsessively tracks what frightens us: death, illness, the injury and endurance of love and friendship.

What frightens us is the delicacy and tenderness with which he treats his subjects. Many times as an Anderson reader I have felt as if I was falling in love with an executioner. This is an odd relationship between poet and reader, but Anderson has often claimed that poetry is like engaging in an intimate conversation. In such an exchange we are bound to hear what we cannot bear, though we must hear and bear it. His method is relentless and confrontational; his subjects never vary; his early syllabics, his later formal echoes, the repetition and subtle rhyme simultaneously charm and haunt us. If, for the most part, the new poems vex us because they do not seem to push beyond previous accomplishment, they do not indicate a flagging of spirit or talent, either. In the title poem (the most memorable of the new poems) the poet comments on his boyhood, on the defining presence of the father, and concludes with these stanzas:

> When my son lay sewn
> To the sheets, adrift in his

[3] THE MILKY WAY: Poems 1967–1982, by *Jon Anderson*. The Ecco Press. $14.95.

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Diabetic coma among
The blown, seductive stars,
I could not think of
Anything to say, for he was
Not anywhere nearby.
He said *Papa* & came back.
Tonight, in his play
He captains a sleek starship
Toward the Milky Way.

When I was a boy, the City of
Boston lay miles away
Within our sight. Evenings we
Set our chairs upon
The lawn & talked. Few thoughts,
A way of watching until
Dark. Then as our small wickers
Floated through the night
I wished I might be taken away
To live forever in that
Distant city made wholly of light.

Jon Anderson makes flesh of that yearning in all of us in poems that ripple with sentiment but are seldom sentimental.

Albert Goldbarth[4] obviously labors on a planet a galaxy away from Anderson's base of operations. Here the mimetic impulse dominates and is more blatantly autobiographical. This is a traditional application of mimesis in poetry and accounts for the *shapelessness*, or *plotlessness*, of many of these narratives. If you are going to follow the story, you must be prepared to navigate rambling detours by making associative leaps; you must be sensitive to gesture, nuance, atmosphere.

Goldbarth's poetry is always hyperactive. It bristles with intelligence. One gets the feeling that he comes to *learning* with a child's delight, and his learning is everywhere visible—as if shot from a scattergun. "There Is a Legend About a Piano That Somehow Got Flushed Into the Sewers of Chicago" provides an excellent example. The poet begins with a long anecdote about St. Augustine coming upon St. Ambrose, who is reading. This leaps into the present where a girl plays a Mozart sonata for the narrator. Closing his eyes, he imagines a piano player in a bar in Chicago, then envisions the lives of the saints. This is typical movement in a Goldbarth poem and the slack reader will find it difficult to keep up.

Unfortunately (though understandably) no excerpts from Goldbarth's book-length poems are included here. However, what remains will exhilarate and exhaust you. There is enough virtuosity,

[4] ORIGINAL LIGHT: New and Selected Poems 1973–1983, by *Albert Goldbarth*. Ontario Review Press. $12.95; $7.95.

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enough sheer delight in language, to offset the occasional sloppiness, the flat endings, the puerile preoccupation with locker-room sex talk. It is easy to think of Albert Goldbarth in the same way one thinks of Russell Edson—very strange and *very* good for us.

> . . . I want to set
> a meal in my heart for everybody I've ever loved.
> I want them to sit in those huge red vaulted
> chambers, and banquetize themselves happy, and
> talk to each other at once—
>
> "The Accountings"

Many years ago in my reading I was shopping for a good contemporary lyric poet. I had trouble finding what I was looking for until a friend recommended the poems of Louis Simpson. "The best we've got," he said. *People Live Here*[5] includes more than 100 poems from the author's ten previous books and chapbooks, and from recent uncollected poems. Also included is an afterword by Simpson himself, "The Sake of Words for Their Own Sake."

This latter piece consists of a charming and honest description of Simpson's Jamaican childhood ("I am the other Jamaican, a child of the middle class, some of us white, some 'colored,' but all of us borrowing our manners and prejudices from the English"), his early inspiration to become a writer ("the stories my mother read to me"), his education and war experience, his political awakening and what he was reading at various times. Readers will be touched by the ease and good humor with which Simpson examines Simpson. An example of that humor occurs when he mentions his discovery of A. E. Housman: " . . . for a year or two [I] read his lyrics with the kind of sympathy that a young American now feels for rock."

The poems, too, should shake a lot of napping readers awake. The thematic continuity spanning the thirty-four years covered here is remarkable. Simpson has always focused on physical and spiritual love, reconciling the present with the past via the family, man's inhumanity to his fellow man, war, and spiritual poverty.

The book's first two sections display traditional, and beautiful, lyrics; Section Two contains poems inspired by his war years. These are some of the most powerful anti-war poems of our time. "The Heroes" is an example of this; it is also an example of a successful recombination of the four impulses I have referred to before.

> A fine dust has settled on all that scrap metal.
> The heroes were packaged and sent home in parts
> To pluck a poppy and sew on a petal
> And count the long night by the stroke of their hearts.

Section Three chronicles the poet's relocation to America. A sig-

[5] PEOPLE LIVE HERE: Selected Poems 1949–1983, by *Louis Simpson*. Boa Editions, LTD. $15.95; $7.95.

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nificant thread here is an ongoing debate with the spirit of Whitman. Having absorbed the latter, Simpson arrives with great expectations only to find himself striding, lonely, through a land "where malls are our churches."

"Modern Lives," the fourth section, is the most cantankerous and didactic expression of Simpson's social criticism. The poet settles into suburbia with its prefab specters and infidelities and bears a collective suffering.

Section Five explores his mother's (and his own) eastern European roots. Here is a fascinating contrast with Section Three, for Chekhov supplants Whitman as the narrator's aggressively remote foil.

"Armidale," the shortest section in the book, takes as its impetus an Australian journey, which inspires a number of weighty assertions concerning our misuse of nature, our misuse of ourselves.

The final section, "Recapitulations," recombines these various byways and offers a fitting coda.

Another offering, *The Best Hour of the Night*,[6] proves that Louis Simpson's work and development, luckily for us, continues. Here the poet adds to his canon of poems about contemporary life by employing deft recombinations of, primarily, historical and mimetic impulses. In addition, he reminds us again that laughter can work in a poem and even be necessary. In "Physical Universe" a man comes downstairs at 5 A.M. and pours a cup of coffee. Finding his son's science text on the table, he begins to read. The text triggers a meditation on our civilization, on the fact that we find ourselves at-and-away-from home in it. The meditation comes full circle, back to the present day—"Tuesday, the day they pick up the garbage! / He leapt into action." This witty transition sets up the return to bed and one of the most tender moments I've seen in recent poetry.

> Susan said, "Did you put out the garbage?"
> But her eyes were closed.
> She was sleeping, yet could speak in her sleep,
> ask a question, even answer one.
> . . . .
> He thought, perhaps she's an oracle,
> speaking from the Collective Unconscious.
> He said to her, "Do you agree with Darwin
> that people and monkeys have a common ancestor?
> Or should we stick to the Bible?"
>
> She said, "Did you take out the garbage?"

How much tenderness, overcoming wit, is embedded in the woman's repeated question. In spite of the unpoetic focal point, in spite of the unpoetic character of what the characters say, the precariousness of love is illuminated.

[6] THE BEST HOUR OF THE NIGHT, by *Louis Simpson*. Ticknor & Fields. $12.95.

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Such moments abound in these poems, but nowhere do they appear with such regularity as in the long poem, "The Previous Tenant." In this tale the central character, sometimes detached, sometimes obsessed, pieces together the story of his predecessor. That fellow, a doctor, ruined his position by engaging in an ill-advised affair. Though he actually appears only once, in the poem's eighth section (to retrieve sullenly some of his belongings), we feel that we know him all too well by poem's end. And worse, we feel that we know the community's upstanding snobs who hounded him, too. Simpson's surgical social commentary is as devastating as ever. In Section Seven, the narrator discovers a packet of the woman's letters to her lover behind a row of mystery novels and sits down to read them:

> "If you have a new woman in your life
> or you've gone back to your wife
> I don't want to muck things up.
> This is just a peacepipe, kid—
> send me a smoke signal
> if I'm getting in the way of anything.
> Cheerio, Irene."
>
> Then they picked up again where they'd left off.
> They had been with each other
> yesterday. She could still feel him inside her.
>
> I was beginning to be afraid
> for him. For her. For both of them.

Louis Simpson makes our collective fear beautiful, and helps us to believe that we can manage it.

The next four books are very much the products of poets in midcareer. These poets are avidly engaged in experiments of style. They have not yet reached the point where the necessity for summing up asserts itself, though all of these books confirm arresting commitments.

Of the six poems in Frank Bidart's *The Sacrifice*,[7] two are of immense value. "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky" and "Confessional" are potent recombinations of narrative impulses. In the former, Bidart's impulse is essentially historical. He tracks an actual celebrity through the dark night of the soul. Romantic, didactic, and mimetic impulses, though present throughout the poem, are allusive, their presence the result of accumulation. The movement—the succession—of the narrative is embedded in Nijinsky's dramatic monologue, which is unusually clear and complex. This, in part, is a result of interwoven anecdotes from secondary sources. The method gives the lie to the belief that the long contemporary narrative must

[7] THE SACRIFICE, by *Frank Bidart*. Vintage Books. $5.95p.

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employ a lot of discursive language in order to keep the story moving. Bidart's brief discursive moments do not really occur for the sake of explanation. They surface as bridges, providing passage for suggestive associative leaps, the staples of the mimetic impulse. When this recombination occurs, the historical character explodes the restraints of biography and speaks for the author and for all of us, as well as for himself.

In "Confessional," historical and mimetic impulses are again of equal importance as the speaker gropes toward resolution of his confused feelings for his deceased mother. The movement—from the narrator's confession to the riveting details of his mother's life to the anecdote concerning Augustine and *his* mother—is cinematic. The reader reluctantly emerges from this poem having achieved a *sense* of a life.

> When I was eleven, she converted to Christ—
>
> She began to simplify her life, denied
> herself, and said that she and I must struggle
>
> "to divest ourselves
> of the love of CREATED BEINGS,"—
>
> and to help me to do that,
>
> one day
> she hanged my cat.

This strategy challenges and satisfies. Nothing is wasteful as the relentless questioner assaults the desperate speaker whose only tickets to absolution are intelligence and humanity that result from facing up to it—the things between mother and son that never got said. Romantic impulses and didactic impulses also contribute to this successful strategy—the former occasion the yearning for a more innocent and honest relationship; the latter become obvious via the process of accumulation and suggest a better way to live.

Finally, I must commend the prosodic concerns in this poetry. More than anyone writing today, Bidart legitimizes the notion of a visual prosody. His poems are proof that lines *on the page* create *visual* rhythms accurately conveying the sense of hesitations in speech and the gestures and expressions accompanying them. This poetry is meant for the eye as well as for the ear. It enlarges and enhances understanding of our world.

I can reverse my concluding statement about Bidart to express my only reservation about *Tar*[8] by C. K. Williams. His long, long lines are not so much prosodically relentless as relentlessly long. In other words, the reader of *Tar* must be prepared to deal with an

[8] TAR, by *C. K. Williams*. Vintage Books. $5.95p.

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acute sensation of visual monotony. However, he ought to be prepared to overcome it by trusting his ear.

C. K. Williams succeeds in compressing and depicting the convoluted nature of conversation, the rambling qualities of letters to intimate friends. Decked out in elegant repetitions and the adjectival necklaces of Robert Lowell, these poems yearn for peace of mind—the state of grace before paradox, doubt, and loss of faith started working, keeping one up all night, every night. In "My Mother's Lips," the speaker remembers his mother's habit of lip-synching his words as he spoke to her.

> when I was saying something to her, something important, she would move her lips as I was speaking
> so that she seemed to be saying under her breath the very words I was saying as I was saying them.
>
> Or, even more disconcertingly—wildly so now that my puberty had erupted—*before* I said them.
> When I was smaller, I must just have assumed that she was omniscient. Why not?
> She knew everything else—when I was tired, or lying; she know I was ill before I did.
> I may even have thought—how could it not have come into my mind? —that she *caused* what I said.

Coming back to the present, to the fact of his own parenthood, the speaker recognizes "the edge of anxiety in it, the wanting to bring you along out of the silence, / the compulsion to lift you again from those blank caverns of namelessness we encase." His paranoia is transformed, becoming the ability to recognize a graceful and compassionate gesture. This is the moment Williams is after, and his talent in rendering it sets him apart from the standard fare of incomplete details, shoddy transitions and sensational assertions. This poet is always in service to his subjects. Through fierce observation he becomes the story he is telling, allowing it gradually to reveal itself through him.

Summer Celestial[9] records the continuation of Stanley Plumly's attempt to get back to the terms of an old agreement. There is much sadness here—"My father would sit on the edge of the bed / and let the tears fall to the floor"; "I cannot believe / one dead leaf alive"; "This is not what I wanted. I was / in love. I was one blind body moving over another"—but it is not wholly the sadness of defeat. Rather, it is the sadness inherent in one who knows that revelation will not return lost innocence. Suffering exacts its price. The anchors of childhood (grandmother, father, summer resorts, our mother's feet) vanish, and we can never get them back. In poems, we return to them by honoring them, by creating other things. We

[9] SUMMER CELESTIAL, by *Stanley Plumly*. The Ecco Press. $13.50.

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become aware of death working, and we confront that moment of awareness again and again. That is the beauty of memory. That is its curse, too, and Plumly knows it well.

He knows it so well that in some of his previous volumes he has constructed a number of accomplished poems in service to this essentially romantic impulse. In this book, too, we find the quantitative pentameter and internal rhyme, the echoes of Roethke upon the terraces of childhood. In addition (and especially in the poems of the latter section), *Summer Celestial* unveils a widening set of concerns. The historical impulse is awakened, and joining hands with the romantic and mimetic, develops the most ambitious poems Plumly has written. "Blossom" exemplifies this breakthrough. Beginning with the description of a disturbed war veteran whose "head was a rose," the poem evolves into a comment on blacks in Winchester, Virginia in 1945 ("the blacks were still dark clouds"). Then memory calls forth the vision of the National Guard marching eleven German prisoners of war through the town. Blacks and whites line up to watch. The moment when autobiography, biography, history, and romance recombine is at hand:

> The National Guard in nineteen forty-five was my father and any other son who stayed home. Next door the father of my friend had been home two long years, one arm, one leg gone. He was
>
> honorary. He was white sometimes, and black, depending.
> He was leaf and woodsmoke and leaning always into the wind.
>
> And everybody called him Blossom because of the piece of apple he kept tucked at one side of his mouth. When he was drinking he'd bring his bottle over and talk to my father about Germans.
>
> They go down, he'd say, they all go down on their guns.

This is the breadth of vision that commands attention.

The Animals[10] by Richard Grossman is also *an experience*. Primarily, it is a beautifully printed and bound pastoral. "Prologue to the Reader" declares the style and tone of the succeeding 499 pages:

> Every man has his cage to share
> with other animals. And his consummate rage to consume
> him. The cage remains.
> Only the identities change within.

The pastoral, its impulses romantic and didactic, is rooted in fictional narrative. Grossman plots his out by dividing it into thirds; the first and concluding sections involve the shepherd and the community of animals as they grapple with important issues. A random list of titles suggests these concerns: "Calumny," "Ignorance," "The

[10] THE ANIMALS, by *Richard Grossman*. Zygote Press. $30.00.

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Muse," "Stash," "Physics," and so on. The middle section consists of poems for individual animals: "Giraffe," "Badger," "Trilobite," "Llama," "Aphid," and others. In addition, he modernizes this contribution to a classic mode by employing a shepherd who is temperamentally very much a part of our world. As a savvy, cynical medium between a remote god and the frightened animals, he sheds tradition's rags of amazement. In fact, this shepherd could just as easily appear in poem after poem as an all-night gas-station attendant. "The singular thing about nothing / is that nobody / can find it. / Run through the fog. / Come close," he tells the animals in "Ontology," and we grasp the recurrent didactic message. The mysteries of life are terrifying. We can, at best, gain only a shadowy understanding of them.

But I don't want to mislead you. The cynicism and despair you will find here is of the soft and cuddly variety. This rambling monument delights in shaping and naming. The writing itself is certainly uneven. A number of poems are no better than workshop exercises, but many are worth reading for their lyrical tenderness and good humor.

The following are second major collections by young poets. The first, *Museum*[11] by Rita Dove, is very much the work of a poet who knows what she is about. "Any fear, any / memory will do," she writes in "Primer for the Nuclear Age," "and if you've / got a heart at all, someday / it will kill you." The discipline of an historical context is imposed on memory, which in turn neutralizes fear. Thus in the first section a number of historical characters—Nestor's wife, Tou Wan, Catherine of Alexandria, Boccaccio, Catherine of Siena—rise up, overcoming crisis with cleverness, persistence, and blind faith. Section Two, except for two poems ("Banneker" and "Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove"), ushers in the modern world of the narrator, while in Section Three an archaelogical preoccupation focuses on the family, specifically on the father. "Grape Sherbet," "Roses," and "A Father Out Walking on the Lawn" are especially deft and touching.

It is interesting, as well, to find this section following the first two. By placing it where she does, Dove successfully recombines biography and autobiography—historical and mimetic impulses. Attempts to achieve this synthesis have defeated countless writers, but Dove succeeds. In the fourth and concluding section she allusively combines these impulses in every poem. This strategy culminates in "Parsley," a marvelous poem in which the dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo (whose mother "could roll an R like a queen"), orders 20,000 blacks killed because they cannot pronounce the letter "r" in *perejil*, the Spanish word for parsley.

> *My mother, my love in death.*
> The general remembers the tiny green sprigs

[11] MUSEUM, by *Rita Dove*. Carnegie-Mellon University Press. $13.95; $5.95.

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men of his village wore in their capes
to honor the birth of a son. He will
order many, this time, to be killed

for a single, beautiful word.

The poem, in two parts, begins with a villanelle. Given the subject, the effect of the classic form is chilling. "Parsley" is a grand climax to a superb book in which Rita Dove preserves the tradition of poetry while introducing new possibilities.

Corpse and Mirror[12] by John Yau appears in the 1983 National Poetry Series. Like John Ashbery, the poet who selected this volume for publication, Yau is enthusiastically engaged in making a language of word play and repetition, of circularity and elusive profundity, of outrageous associative leaps and fractured attention spans. The motto over the door? *More—much more—is more.* However, some of us require more than a surface sheen. Some of us require getting in touch with the necessary things a poet has to say. Some of us grow tired staring at shellac glazing the absence of substance.

Someone is hacking someone apart in a city
whose name rhymes with your own; a city you
never heard of before; a city you cannot visit
even though it visits you the way the day begins;
the way the day begins with a shimmering pulse
a pulse of expectation followed by a need
to hear someone call your name.

"Brief Item"

This poem illustrates Yau's method. The slash-and-tear beginning (fashionable in itself) slogs into repetition; the quantitative pentameter chugs to the shorter, concluding line, which is a splash of sentimentality. So we traveled seven lines for a little AM radio heartache. There is more of it, too, a lot more, elsewhere in the five rambling sections of this book, and that self-pitying tone makes this reader more than a little weary.

Curiously, Yau succeeds in three short prose pieces: "Two Kinds of Language," "Nantucket," and best of all, "Two Meditations on Guanajuato." Yau finds subjects in these pieces and faithfully sticks to them. Perhaps he is able to do so because he does not feel the pressure to be clever, or cute, in lines. In this excerpt from "Two Meditations on Guanajuato," the speaker describes one of the corpses:

If you are buried in the soil of Guanajuato, you shrink. Everything is squeezed out of you, like a sponge, until only the essential elements remain.

[12] CORPSE AND MIRROR, by *John Yau*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. $7.95.

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I wish *Corpse and Mirror* offered more writing like this, but Yau has not yet discovered a guiding self-discipline. So far, he has spent too much time writing lines like "Maybe the king does / Know what I am thinking, for even my metaphors defeat me." Yes.

The Greater Leisures[13] also appears in the 1983 National Poetry Series. Selected by Stanley Plumly, Jane Miller's book is a fascinating case study, for it is all style in search of a subject. Three types of lines are combined to create this style: the dense, lesson-line ("In empty space / magnetic fields exist / for no reason"), the mystery-image line ("the exclamation / point finding its black beach"), and the discursive line that gets the speaker into the action ("In Europe I love / the beach towns and trains best"). To what end are these lines regularly combined? To create sensation, especially the sensation of loss or frustration. This minimal aim suggests severe limitations we don't find in the best work of this type of poetry's immediate precursors—Marvin Bell, Norman Dubie, and Jorie Graham.

Only in "Immense Virgin Girls," "The I Will if You Will," "Hanging Meditation," and the ambitious "Tulips for Two and Four Hands" does Miller lay aside laborious convolutions for things that must be said. Only in the poems above does nettlesome condescension toward subject disappear. Elsewhere one must endure lines like "No one ordinary / chooses the long journey" or "Basics / aside, I like the middle class." Elsewhere the reader will encounter a number of bathetic and sentimental assertions: "We go back to our places / no longer lovers"; "Birds perch on our shutters / as on the rosy corners of your mouth"; "Two bluebirds speck the heavens and move on"; "Next week we shall say 'three years' / as if there were such / white peaches, / in Russia." Paradoxically, these flaws are frequently encouraged and disguised by the style Miller has chosen.

Finally, this volume lacks recognition of—and confidence in—its concealed strength. Though the autobiographical approach suggests a dominant mimetic impulse, what struggles toward the surface (and occasionally breaks through) is a poetry of assertions. The ultimate demand of such poetry is simple: you must believe in what you are saying. If a recurrent point in your poetry is that there *is* no point, then why bother? *The Greater Leisures* does not provide an adequate response.

Liam Rector's *The Sorrow of Architecture*[14] is the only debut among the volumes considered here, but it does not read like a first book. In Rector's poems you will find no wandering from subject to subject, no tentative groping toward distinctive style.

What you will find is a collection of poems about money (and what we do to get it), the movies, the rooms we live in, the functional rooms we wish were somehow *more*. This book is also about char-

[13] THE GREATER LEISURES, by *Jane Miller*. Doubleday. $10.95; $5.95.

[14] THE SORROW OF ARCHITECTURE, by *Liam Rector*. Dragon Gate Press. $14.00; $6.00.

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acters who are very close to one another while heading in opposite directions. This is a book about travel, about how we keep moving to be saved though moving cannot save us. Movie figures (Laurence Harvey, Robert Mitchum, Shirley MacLaine, Gina Lollobrigida) become alter-egos; scenes from their films become vivid touchstones warning us about what will happen if we do this or that. Nouns (apartment, wharf, afternoon, dog) drop their articles and become proper names. They become characters, too.

In other words, Rector's world is inclusive, providing a potent example of the recombination of romantic, biographical, and autobiographical impulses. What emerges in this reunion? Characters who are fully drawn ("A Visionary bowler," "a casually bitter stroller"), contemporary settings in which the reader is involved in "the getting-dark drama / of the streets," recognition of the necessity and remorse embedded in "the sting of staying even." What comes out of this reunion is a combative intelligence as evidenced here in "Saxophone":

> Promotion money, earning "good money,"
> having no money, doing it for money.
> Money turned to power no longer
> money, money through time, the spirit
> of money—secular, psychological money.
> Who's Got and Where Can We Get
> some money?
>
> You and I, our money. Their money.
> Our pleasure and fist full of money.
> Laughter over money, serious laughter
> over money. Too much, too little,
> fluid money. The saxophone, color of wheat,
> purchased through Hock Shop money, saxophone
> splitting the night, our air, blowing money.

These are the driving rhythms of tough talk, but they do not lock Rector into a monotonous level of intensity. This poet knows when and how to employ irregular spacing, colloquial rhythms juxtaposed with traditional, incantatory rhythms (see "David's Rumor," "Driving November," "The Carpenter"), interior and end rhymes. Purists will even discover an excellent ballad, "When Down by Long-Boy's Lane," and a poem, "In Snow," which plunders (and improves upon) Poe's meter in "The Raven."

Liam Rector has forged an aggressive vision tempered by sentiment. In the conclusion of the title poem he sums up the dissolution of a marriage:

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Yes, you're exhausted. Stay where you are.

I think I can hear it, what vanishes and is.
I step up to a public phone to call you and tell you.
The city slides back into the invisible,
impossible, and there is sorrow on the line.

There is heartbreak and perseverance here, an expressive style you will not find anywhere else in contemporary poetry. *The Sorrow of Architecture* introduces an original and commanding speaker for our time.

The next two volumes are by authors who have splendidly nurtured poetic tradition for decades. The first, *The Wheel*[15] by Wendell Berry, reads like assertions of a voice out of time. His celebratory tone, in a grinding age, is enough to isolate Berry. Isolation is essential to his process, for he has always put himself in service to the illustration of circularity. The elegiac poems in this his eighth volume are full of the passage of seasons, the incantatory rhythms of prayer, the miracles of birth and death and the journey between. They are didactic, in a traditional, affirmative sense, in that they strive to teach by example. They resonate with the voice of authority forged by well-documented personal experience.

It is common knowledge that Berry, for the most part, shuns literary circles for the company of his neighbors in Port Royal, Kentucky, that he prefers to give lectures on farming rather than on poetry. In a very important sense, he provides us with a heartening example of the artist who balances his craft with the other elements of a full life. Furthermore, he is a living bridge to a rural America that is in danger of passing irretrievably into history. His position is unique. From it he continues to preserve the past, to honor our spiritual foundations. He reminds us that it is best not to ask for too much, but to ask much of ourselves.

We are others and the earth,
the living of the dead.
Remembering who we are,
we live in eternity;
any solitary act
is work of community.
"From the Distance"

For many years Richmond Lattimore[16] has practiced poetry with an archivist's zeal. Like Wendell Berry, he preserves the past by reminding us of the grace and flexibility of traditional forms. There

[15] THE WHEEL, by *Wendell Berry*. North Point Press. $5.00p.
[16] CONTINUING CONCLUSIONS, by *Richmond Lattimore*. Louisiana State University Press. $13.95; $5.95.

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the comparison ends. Whereas Berry's vision is that peculiar transcendental determinism of the American rural experience, Lattimore's is cosmopolitan, reflecting a lifelong immersion in other cultures and literary traditions.

The current volume presents fifty-one of Lattimore's recent poems and translations (the latter from the work of Passerat, Cavafy, Hugo, and Leconte de Lisle, among others) and attests to his extraordinary range. Even after several readings it is difficult to say where he feels most at home, but the poems appear, more often than not, to begin with romantic and historical impulses. This recombination of disparate narrative branches is itself enough to win appreciation. In addition, readers will be moved by the tone of the current volume. This, too, is an elegiac book, a gritty celebration of lives lived fully, of temporal beauty, of aging without surrender.

> In Egypt, the tiniest
> of eggs hatched by the Nile
> grows into the biggest beast:
> the monstrous crocodile.
>
> In Sparta, once again,
> they had the best government: perfect, foursquare.
> It had been the worst in the memory of men.
>
> Read history with care.

It is possible to refer to both of these volumes as noble books—an assertion that seems out of place in our time; we are richer by far if we claim them *in* our time.

Finally, *Poems & Stories*,[17] the posthumous volume of Richard Blessing's work, makes clear how unlucky all of us are to have lost so fine a writer. The brief stories in Sections One and Three and the poems in Section Two develop through backward, or outward, movement. Either the light is flicked on in childhood's vault or the spotlight falls on the lives of characters observed by an impartial narrator. "Grandma and the Eskimos" begins in the family kitchen where the men discuss what is to be done about the aged, ailing grandmother. A child listens:

> "Yessir," he says, "your Eskimos, they'd handle it right."
> My father puffs his pipe and says nothing. He can do this.
> It's his trick, like weather so nice nobody notices.
> "Somebody gets old like that, can't go it, you know,"

[17] POEMS & STORIES, by *Richard Blessing*. Dragon Gate Press. $14.00; $6.00.

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my uncle says, "Eskimos just set her out on the ice. Say goodbye.
Go off and don't think about it no more."

Later, the child asks his father what the one on the ice dreams about. The father tells him they are good dreams, then reassures the child who has expressed his fear of growing old: " 'Kid,' says my father, 'it's the best there is.' "

In the poem "Late News," a Polish worker, Dombrowski, launches upon a killing spree. The narrator's speculations cover Dombrowski's state of mind and the usual responses from a co-worker and the chief of police. Then this remarkable transition appears:

> What if, in sullen wisdom,
> we give in, retreat from the little town, or all
> of Pennsylvania? Let the mad inherit their corner
> of earth.
> There would be space for miles
> where only wind would blow. After a while, the mines
> would go back to the grass. Bass would lie deep
> in the Allegheny, as if they had never gone away.
>
> One morning even Dombrowski might lay down his gun,
> walk naked in a meadow that had been his yard.
> Great waves of butterflies would ride the wind
> and the ground would drum with distant hooves.
>
> There is a sun so old no man has seen it.
> In Pennsylvania, Dombrowski lifts his eyes.

The tone that occurs repeatedly in these poems and stories is tender, reassuring, *and believable*. It is extremely difficult to transform an essentially historical narrative into romance in a single poem or story, but that is precisely what Blessing does. This method becomes especially heartbreaking in the book's concluding section, which focuses on a long hospital stay and coming home. In the final poem, "Homecoming," patient and wife join hands while gazing out of a high window:

> And beyond Ballard, the end of the earth,
> miles out on the black of Puget Sound,
> two boats, no more lost than all the planets,
> bear their small lights outward, to the sea.

Richard Blessing understood his narrative impulses and accomplished enduring, endearing poems and stories.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

New Renderings

TRANSLATION IS ONE WAY OF RECALLING to the public mind works which would otherwise be lost through the amnesia of time or the multiplicity of languages. The poet's material is especially local, a particular language in a given epoch; so the task of translating poetry is all the more difficult and necessary, if we are to retrieve the significance of works which, like the stars, are constantly moving away from us. This centrifugal tendency is part of the human condition of fragmentation, from which we must salvage what we can into a constantly renewed wholeness.

In St. Augustine's *Confessions*, a translation between the City of Man and the City of God, there are two sides to the project of recalling. Platonic recollection is the grasp of universal and abstract structures which the reasonable soul introspects. But this in itself is not sufficient. We must also try to remember the complex facts of our own particular existence, which entails dependency on others: older people provide details about our infancy; contemporaries correct our subjectivity by their differing perspectives.

Likewise, the translator of a poem cannot simply refer to the formal structures of grammar and logic, nor even the idealized semantics in the dictionary of science. A foreign language constitutes a form of life, a thicket, an otherness, which must be remembered in its stubborn and individual richness, different from any other. Recollection and remembering, reflection and experience, universal structure and concrete particularity, are all sources of intelligibility. The translator must move among them in order to produce a new rendering which, though never complete, will nonetheless have its own integrity.

Richard Howard's translation of *Les Fleurs du Mal*[1] will please English-speaking readers of Baudelaire who, like me, have long struggled to discern the shape of his view of things through the variety of his poems and the luxuriance (post-Hugo) of his verbal means. Howard's versions are generally accurate and straightforward; together with the originals, which are not interleaved but follow the English, they make the daunting bulk of Baudelaire's oeuvre more quickly accessible. In addition, Howard sometimes even manages to rival the sensual music of Baudelaire's prosody, as here in "Sorrows of the Moon":

[1] LES FLEURS DU MAL, by *Charles Baudelaire*. Trans. by *Richard Howard*. David R. Godine. $22.50; 12.95.

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> . . . On a silken avalanche of clouds
> the moon, expiring, falls into a trance,
> impassive as the great white visions file
> past in procession, like unfolding flowers.

In his Foreword Howard acknowledges that the sum of Baudelaire's poems has the coherence of a mythology. (I would say metaphysics; Baudelaire was as significant and original in his own way as Nietzsche.) He has tried, Howard continues, to render that mythology faithfully, in a style at once richer and more intimate than his predecessors, Symons and Lowell. While his attempt is generally successful, I would like to point out certain passages where, by the subtle alteration of a few words and phrases, Howard misrepresents Baudelaire's vision.

Baudelaire's poet-persona is blessed and cursed by an imagination which cannot rest content on earth, but projects itself into a flight "beyond," "au-delà." This movement is quite clear in the poem "Elevation."

> Par delà le soleil, par delà les éthers,
> Par delà les confins des sphères étoilées,
>
> Mon esprit, tu te meus avec agilité.

The poet's soul launches outward, "vers les champs lumineux et sereins," "vers les cieux." In Howard's translation, however, the spirit is exhorted to mount "to the farthest confines of the starry vault," "to a higher plane," "to the fields of light," as if there were some fairly definite place it could aim for. But whereas Dante, for example, knows throughout his pilgrimage that a heavenly sphere awaits him and can locate it within divine geography, Baudelaire's imagination only endlessly displaces itself into an indefinite beyond. Like a lark in air, or a person swimming in mid-ocean, it can find nowhere to settle; out there, in fact, no places exist at all. The poet's destiny is not to find another sphere, but bravely and musically to ride above all ordinary resting places.

Again, in "Correspondences," that most famous stanza

> La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
> Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
> L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
> Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

becomes

> The pillars of Nature's temple are alive
> and sometimes yield perplexing messages;
> forests of symbols between us and the shrine
> remark our passage with accustomed eyes.

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But Baudelaire says nothing about a shrine, an image which fixes and hypostatizes the mystery which he takes great pains to leave indeterminate. So, too, correspondences "comme de longs echos qui de loin se confondent" should not be described as "like long-held echoes, blending somewhere else," for this is another placement. There is no transcendent Elsewhere for Baudelaire, only an expansion, a transport.

Two translations of Rilke's poetry have recently appeared which deserve attention. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*,[2] translated by Stephen Mitchell, is a selection of poems from all periods of Rilke's career, including many which he never published. A number of the latter also appear in *Rilke: Poems 1912–1926*,[3] edited and translated by Michael Hamburger, an assortment which stems largely from Rilke's "crisis years" between the *New Poems* (1908) and the *Duino Elegies* (1922). These poems pose a grave difficulty for the translator, for they are written in highly unnatural German which often simply violates the rules of grammar. Mitchell has chosen to turn them into English poems which read smoothly; Hamburger's English is often more strange and so closer to the original, but even he normalizes Rilke's syntax.

"To Hölderlin," for example, begins: "Verweilung, auch am Vertrautesten nicht, / ist uns gegeben." The quite artificial substantive made from the verb "verweilen" is almost a neologism; Rilke audaciously sets it first in the sentence, and compounds the effect by hypostatizing a superlative adjective. The "we" is given only a passive and negative function. Such extraordinarily strange and concentrated German is, I think, an expressive analogue of Rilke's conception of reality; it also echoes the odd syntax of Hölderlin's word-for-word translations of Pindar's involuted Greek. In Mitchell's version, which reads beautifully but loses the emphatic reversal of active and passive, verb and substantive, these lines become "We are not permitted to linger, even with what is most / intimate." Hamburger's version is closer and more awkward: "To stay, among things most familiar even, / we are not permitted."

In "Wendung," an autobiographical poem about his crisis, Rilke writes of himself that the landscape "ruhete hin in sein stilles Gewahren, abends." Again there is a hypostatized verb, "Gewahren," which is put not in the dative but in a highly abnormal accusative, reinforced by the particle "hin"; "abends" turns up at the end of the sentence where it can't belong. Hamburger tries to capture the "towards" motion of the accusative this way:

> But how often the landscape
> overburdened by day
> ebbed to rest in his quiet perceiving, at nightfall.

[2] THE SELECTED POETRY OF RAINER MARIA RILKE, ed. and trans. by *Stephen Mitchell*. Random House. $25.00.

[3] RILKE: Poems 1912–1926, trans. and ed. by *Michael Hamburger*. Black Swan Books. $17.50.

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And Mitchell writes, "came to rest in his silent awareness, at nightfall." In both cases the English is grammatically correct, though of course English doesn't offer the same possibility of playing upon cases. But the full effect of the wrenched syntax, the verbal evocation of *Weltinnigkeit*, is lost. Rilke's poet does not wander through a landscape; instead, he becomes a stasis ("Gewahren") through which the landscape itself moves.

Many of Mitchell's translations are dramatically attractive as English poems. And Robert Hass's Introduction to them is a charmingly written, often moving appreciation of Rilke; yet both poets compose and polish him. Hamburger's Introduction, by contrast, captures much of the strange artificiality of Rilke's vision and life during the period 1912–1926, not without honoring the poetry it produced.

Any contemporary poet who tries to translate poetry which is formal in the old fashion must make decisions about the extent to which he or she will try to reproduce closed, precise patterns of rhyme and meter. In an essay published in 1974, Joseph Brodsky criticized two recent translations of Mandelstam into English for not attempting an equivalent in regular forms, but instead lapsing into free verse. He argued that this was unacceptable because a poem's form and content cannot be disentangled.

In an answering essay, Yves Bonnefoy argued that the classical patterns are no longer available to contemporary poets and translators, who must reintegrate form and content in a new way: ". . . perhaps we must lose in the beginning in order to be able later to recover more fully." Classical verse, he observed, was the reflection in prosody of the structure of traditional society; free verse answers to the differentiation and heterodoxy of the modern age; and in the interim nineteenth century, the conventions of regular verse opposed an alternative universe of artistic creation to the exhausted social order. Thus the contemporary poetic instrument, even for translators, is free verse.

This contention may be debated, but it will serve as a useful background for considering the next three volumes. *Goethe: Selected Poems*,[4] edited by Christopher Middleton, contains translations by himself, Michael Hamburger, David Luke, John Frederick Nims and Vernon Watkins. The editing is imaginative and comprehensive, and for that reason alone the book is worth buying. It includes the indispensables ("To the Moon," "The Elf-King," "Mignon"); a sizeable group of the Roman Elegies; some of Goethe's scientific verse, like "The Metamorphosis of Plants"; later orientalizing poems in which Goethe shows the influence of Hafiz; and fascinating poems from his old age, like the "Trilogy of Passion," written at the end of his devastating romance with a girl of seventeen. The notes

[4] GOETHE: Selected Poems, ed. by *Christopher Middleton*, trans. by *Christopher Middleton, Michael Hamburger, David Luke, John Frederick Nims*, and *Vernon Watkins*. Suhrkamp/Insel, Publishers Boston Inc. $29.95.

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and the Introduction (which is not, however, a model of clarity) provide much useful information.

The translations themselves are in general undistinguished, neither conscientiously accurate nor pleasing in their English dress. I believe this is because most of them attempt to reproduce the complex metrical and rhyme patterns of the originals. (Only the two by Vernon Watkins, a master of strict form and thereby a counter-example to Bonnefoy's dictum, are first-rate English poems.) The initial stanzas of "Universal Soul" (Middleton's translation) illustrate my point.

> Go forth, now that this holy feast is done,
> Into all regions of the world disperse;
> Stop not in purlews with your inspiration,
> Enter the All, make full the Universe.
>
> Vast distances already loft your flight;
> Under the stars together, as you race
> You float the dream of gods, and you give light
> In light-inseminated outer space.

This reads like the indifferent verse found in hymnals (to which, by the way, many beautiful Latin and German songs are reduced for the same reason). The first stanza, in German, says nothing of inspiration or the universe, additions which fill out the rhyme scheme. The second stanza bears even less relation to the English; and the transitive use of "float," the repetition of "light," and the anachronistic "outer space" are all unhappy. Middleton does do better elsewhere, but too often his translations are quirky and graceless.

By contrast, John Frederick Nims is a polished versifier, and his translations are often just as good as this first stanza from "Permanence in Change."

> Early blossoms—could a single
> Hour preserve them just as now!
> But the warmer west will scatter
> Petals showering from the bough.
> How enjoy these leaves that lately
> I was grateful to for shade?
> Soon the wind and snow are rolling
> What the late Novembers fade.

Unfortunately, these lines read like light verse because they are so emphatically rhymed and metered. This isn't Nims's fault, but an effect of literary context, for light verse is one of the few domains where strict form still persists. All the same, this impression of levity falsifies Goethe's poem which despite its elegance is a quite serious bit of philosophizing.

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None of the books remaining to be reviewed provide the original poems; since they are all paperbacks, I suppose this has to do with production costs. But it is a serious failing, as I shall argue shortly, which precludes a certain erotic dimension in the relation of reader to poem.

Lyn Coffin's *Anna Akhmatova: Poems*[5] has an Introduction by Joseph Brodsky—an original and sympathetic account of the interweaving of Akhmatova's poetic project and her troubled life. Though Brodsky says nothing explicit in reference to Coffin's translations, I assume he thought well enough of them to provide the Introduction because they do in fact conform to his criterion; at least, they are fully rhymed. (Since I don't know Russian, I can only comment on their effectiveness as poetry in English, not on their fidelity to the original.)

However, they are also riddled with awkward or impossible lines. This is doubly disappointing, given Brodsky's account of the formal bravura of the originals, the extraordinary effects Akhmatova produced by marrying strict formal means to "a collage-like diversification of content." Coffin has a habit, for example, of ending a line with "and" or "but" for the sake of the rhyme scheme; this is usually inappropriate, since a word at the end of a line is emphatic. The following stanza is from "Fisherman."

> Her arms are weak, her cheeks are pale,
> Her exhausted look is mysterious and
> Crabs tickle her feet without fail
> As they crawl out on the sand.

This is supposed to be a portrait of a poor young girl in love with a dashing fisherman; but these lines are almost funny. Another stanza, from a poem of 1917, runs

> I hear the oriole's voice clear and distressed.
> I greet the waning of summer, but
> One wheat ear against another pressed
> The sickles with reptilian hisses cut.

The first line is nicely shaped; the last line is ugly; the syntax of the third and fourth lines cannot be construed. In both stanzas, the meter is pointlessly irregular. Brodsky writes that Akhmatova's "meter is not insistent. Sometimes she'd drop a syllable or two in a stanza's last or penultimate line in order to create an effect of a choked throat or that of unwitting awkwardness caused by emotional tension." But such studied variation of meter is not what Coffin has produced.

Mark Rudman, in collaboration with Bohdan Boychuk, has trans-

[5] ANNA AKHMATOVA: Poems, trans. by *Lyn Coffin*. Norton. $15.50; $5.95.

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lated Boris Pasternak's *My Sister-Life* along with a long poem entitled *A Sublime Malady*.[6] He discusses his project of translating Pasternak in a note at the end of the book. In order fairly to represent the dense imagery, rapid diction and associative texture of the poems, he decided to translate the poems into free verse, retain Pasternak's stanzas, forgo his rhyme and meter, and to parallel his intricate form with a highly stressed, irregular meter. Judging from the results, this decision was sound.

Though I find Pasternak obscure (an obscurity deepened no doubt by my ignorance of his language), this book is full of fascinating poems, some of them almost memorable in Rudman's supple, free-verse quatrains.

> You played that role so well
> I forgot I was your prompter,
> and that you'll play another part
> for others soon.
>
> The boat sailed down the clouds,
> down the hayfields.
> You played the role so well,
> like the stern grazing the sluice-gate.
>
> You hovered at the helm,
> like a swallow on one wing.
> You played the role to the hilt.
> Better than anyone.

In simple and sonorous English, Rudman conveys Pasternak's curious way of blending disappointed love with images of the Russian countryside, a world of fields and water.

Human Landscapes is Nazim Hikmet's epic masterwork, a group portrait of Turkey between the two world wars. Thoroughly modern in style and substance, half poetry, half prose, it still retains elements of classical epic: repetition of formulaic phrases, motifs of battle, banquet and journey. The translation by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Kanuk[7] works very well in English, though again I can't speak for its fidelity. The poem is long, almost 300 pages, but once I had started it almost nothing could disengage me, it was so world-like.

In the Introduction, Mutlu Kanuk tells how the work evolved. Before he was imprisoned in 1938, charged with inciting the army to revolt on the grounds that military cadets were reading his poet-

[6] MY SISTER-LIFE AND A SUBLIME MALADY, by *Boris Pasternak*. Trans. by *Mark Rudman* and *Bohdan Boychuk*. Ardis Publishers. $16.50, $7.50.

[7] HUMAN LANDSCAPES, by *Nazim Hikmet*. Trans. by *Randy Blasing* and *Mutlu Kanuk*. Persea Books. $9.95p.

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ry, Hikmet had published nine books of poetry in a free verse where Western culture confronted the Ottoman tradition. *Human Landscapes* was composed during the twelve years he spent in jail. It began as a kind of encyclopedia, a social history which was a series of portraits of people from all levels of Turkish society. He read it aloud to his fellow inmates as he composed it, and they helped him with the the different levels of diction, dialects and folk material. Eventually these vignettes coalesced into a story about a train journey from Istanbul to Ankara taken by the political prisoner Halil. The narrative weaves in and out of Halil's presence by means of techniques which are self-consciously cinematic (Hikmet was also a screenwriter): zooms, jump-cuts, dissolves and flashbacks.

The English does in fact transmit a gamut of dictions and perspectives, ranging from folk ballad to street talk, the interior monologues of Istanbul intellectuals, battle scenes, jokes and lyric description.

> Spring comes to Ankara Station
> with a heightening of suppressed excitement
> in the station police
> peasant construction workers in the third-class waiting room,
> and, in the restaurant, a yearning for Istanbul
> unfolding like a big green head of lettuce.

Hikmet has an uncanny way of bringing characters to life in a few lines so vividly that, whether they are scurrilous or noble, one can't help but care about them. Here for example is Jemilé Hanum.

> Her beautiful hazel eyes are always made up,
> and her tiny mouth is always painted—
> yet she's almost sixty.
> She has low blood pressure and a bad heart.
> All she does, all she thinks about, is painting.
> She's painted since she was a girl.
> When her husband died ten years ago,
> she sold her jewels and went to Rome at fifty.
> It's a good thing she didn't sell her house,
> or the poor woman would have starved to death when she returned.
> Now she makes ends meet by renting out the first floor.

Hikmet has a refined sense of history and the excesses of passion, but his special gift is to show that every human life is a story, and a compelling one.

Modern Greek is one of those languages, like Italian and Spanish, that I can read word by word with a dictionary, and say out loud slowly for a sense of the music. Such slim acquaintance is no substi-

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tute for thorough study, but many people are in the same boat with me, and it is after all possible to glean quite a bit by going through poems this way. I would claim that this kind of access makes it possible to fall in love with a poem, so that it becomes as much a part of the structure of reality as the room you inhabit, or the faces of your friends; and that, conversely, poems known only through translation cannot engender such erotic attachment. This is the deepest reason I can think of for the importance of bilingual editions.

So I recommend and rue the latest anthology, *Voices of Modern Greece*,[8] put together by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. In the past decade, these two have done more than anyone else to awaken American readers to the riches of contemporary Greek poetry, and this volume brings together the best of their translations of Cavafy, Seferis, Elytis, Gatsos and Sikelianos, but unfortunately without the Greek.

For reasons which have to do with mystery and power, those inexplicable realities, you can become almost more deeply taken by a poem in a language you don't thoroughly understand. (Think of Eliot's liaison with the *Divine Comedy*.) The luminous opacity of the poetry keeps drawing you back. So I have experienced, for example, any number of Seferis' lyrics. The first lines of his great meditation on exile, "Epiphany 1937," haunt my eye and ear like the coastline of Greece, with its slow gold islands and the silence of the Aegean at dawn. The lucky coincidence of Seferis' purity of diction with Keeley and Sherrard's fidelity and grace produce this translation.

> The flowering sea and the mountains in the moon's waning
> the great stone close to the Barbary figs and the asphodels
> the jar that refused to go dry at the end of the day
> and the closed bed by the cypress trees and your hair
> golden; the stars of the Swan and that other star, Aldebaran.
> I've kept a hold on my life, kept a hold on my life, travelling
> among yellow trees in driving rain
> on silent slopes loaded with beech leaves
> no fire on their peaks; it's getting dark.
> I've kept a hold on my life . . .

Such lines are characteristic of the high quality of most of the translations in the anthology; I can think of no better introduction to Greek poetry.

Keeley and Sherrard have not, however, taken much interest in Greek women writers. Eleni Fourtouni's third book, *Four Greek Women: Love Poems*,[9] is an engaging collection of erotic poetry by

[8] VOICES OF MODERN GREECE, ed. by *Edmund Keeley* and *Philip Sherrard*. Princeton University Press. $5.95p.

[9] FOUR GREEK WOMEN: Love Poems, ed. and trans. by *Eleni Fourtouni*. Thelphini Press. $6.95p.

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Victoria Theodorou, Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, Angeliki Pavlopoulou and herself. (She writes in English; the others she has translated into English from Greek.)

Victoria Theodorou spent five years on an island concentration camp following the civil war in Greece. Her present quiet existence in a suburb of Athens is strangely at odds with the intensity of her inner life, of which the poems in this collection represent only one aspect. In *OUPANIA* (published in 1978) she addresses her lover as Hesperus throughout a sequence of short lyrics; here she wonders how to speak across the distance which divides them.

I will not be an owl
on the cypress tree screeching
the same solitary tune,
a dry riverbank, a sick bed,
an ocean of the moon.
I am the one who named you,
described you so that you can exist,
the one keeping you alive with my constant eyes.

What will become of you when I am gone . . .

Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke is a distinguished and cosmopolitan woman of letters. She has published six books of poetry, many critical essays and translations from English, French and Russian; she has also visited America as a Ford Foundation fellow and Fulbright professor. Her poems in this collection, from *The Scattered Papers of Penelope* (1977), explore the corners of grief and exultation in the labyrinth of the human heart. Though she writes with the disillusion and tenderness of Cavafy, and Elytis' luxuriance of image, her world, centered in a pistachio orchard on Aegina, is entirely her own. The following lines come from "Perhaps All Passion Is Coldness."

Passion seems to come
from the alchemy of ice,
a cold that keeps
pain unshared
and the essence of grace
so deeply buried.
It lurks behind things,
like a bone,
an inflexible nerve, hard
incapable of firing,
something like an animal-doorkeeper
with one eye only
staring at chaos

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motionless,
with only one ear
listening to silence

Fourtouni sometimes takes liberties with the poems she translates. She has left out the titles of the poems from *OUPANIA*, for example, and from time to time she drops words or even whole lines from the others. These omissions are like a judgment against the originals, and I regret them. Fourtouni's economies are, however, partly explained by the spareness of her own poetic style. She has chosen the best strategy for writing in a second language—simplicity of expression—and this volume closes with some of her strongest lyrics. The most richly developed, "Klita's Ring," deals with the translation of a ring across time, for it is a copy of an original found in an early grave on an Aegean island, a ring inscribed with Klita's name:

. . . She must have died young, leaving
no daughter to bring her name to us.
Nothing but his gift survives of what
she must have been—a woman with slender hands;
a life marked by the phases
of the moon. The cast of her face,
the tone of her voice, unknown.

The moon, the ring, the name, and nothing more.

Fourtouni's own ring, the copy, is bestowed by one lover, broken, and recalled at the end of another affair, falling apart as if the moon spiraled away from earth. But the silver ring, like the lost moon, returns to memory like a promise half-remembered and still to be recollected.

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MARILYN BUTLER

Reconstructing Keats

HELEN VENDLER IS UNDOUBTEDLY ONE of the finest close readers of a poem we have.[1] Though essentially a New Critic, she is in no sense a literary fossil; her Keats has contemporaries only the 1970s would have given him, Yeats and Wallace Stevens. When reading a poem, she identifies with its writer, and likes to copy it out in order to feel that she is composing it—"deciding on this word rather than another, this arrangement of its masses rather than another, this prolonging, this digression, this cluster of senses, this closure." But she also empathises with the poem's readers, and to her a reading has been achieved through their collective effort over time, which means that she absorbs Yale's Bloom, Hartman and De Man as well as Oxford's John Jones.

Vendler's book begins and ends with quotations from Valéry and Stravinsky on music, the art which perhaps comes closest to her apprehension of poetry. Like the listener to music, she wants to get at "the inner being of the work, its rigorous and fastidious choices, its succession of instinctive and conscious motions, its imperial control and its constant hazarding of disorder, its play of sensibility, its constant tension with tradition." Her particular technique is to "reconstruct" a poem by giving a meticulous account of the interrelations of its independent parts—sound and sense, real and imaginary, logic and syntax, content and form. But she is also concerned with the relations between poems, and the purpose of this book is to establish the subtle pattern of continuity and change in the series of Keats's Odes—"On Indolence," "To Psyche," "To a Nightingale," "On a Grecian Urn," "On Melancholy" and "To Autumn."

There is no just way of summarising a critic as subtle and meticulous as this. Some books are best read about, others demand to be read. A pale second best, in Vendler's case, is to give her account of the six Odes as nearly as possible in her own words.

The central device in "Indolence" is the vision of three sculptural allegorical figures who return at intervals throughout the poem. As embodiments of art and of Fate, they anticipate figures who will recur in all the Odes, but unsatisfactorily. Counterpointing their reappearances and their steady progress is another rhythm, that of the indolent poet, an impotent Prospero, who, having in some sense summoned his vision, nevertheless refuses and dismisses it. The

[1] THE ODES OF JOHN KEATS, by *Helen Vendler*. Belknap Press/Harvard University Press. $18.50.

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successful passages in the poem are the recreations of this poet's scene of indolence, a language of private memory and reverie. "He remains, for the moment, the artist shrinking from embodying his faint vegetative visions in anything resembling an artifact."

In the Odes that follow "Indolence," Keats studies the arts, or (more accurately) creativity, brilliantly varying his approach by taking up a series of contrasting attitudes to the senses. Vendler thinks that Keats's interest in sense-response has been overstressed, and that the Odes often show him limiting sense-effects in order to play up intensity of mind. The "Ode to Psyche" is in this respect, she thinks, the most "puritanical" of the group: "it aims, whatever its sensual metaphors . . . at a complete, exclusive and lasting annihilation of the senses in favor of the brain." She describes its firm structure in four stanzas, the last repeating the first, the third repeating the second, as a reduplication-shape: what appears on the left must reappear in mirror-image on the right. So the first half of the poem describes fact—a world of nature, and a religious cult which existed in history; the second half reduplicates both in Keats's mind, an interior landscape radiantly eroticised to receive the cult of Psyche. His willed adoption of that cult is his response to Milton's equally wilful decision to banish the pagan gods and goddesses; here, and throughout the Odes, Keats's addresses to his Muse are heavily indebted to his two most important precursor-poets, Spenser and Milton. Vendler's reading of the poem's intent as elevating mind is very much at odds, she concedes, with its amorous mythological style, and she puts the unresolved tensions down to Keats's immaturity. "These sacrifices of sense for mind, of melody for tunelessness, and of audience for putative, though scarcely realized, solipsism, coexist uneasily with Keats's sensually opulent style in the ode, a nonascetic style developed for the happier embraces, both spiritual and physical, of *Endymion*."

The "Ode to a Nightingale" and the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" first appeared in a journal called *Annals of the Fine Arts*, and Vendler believes that the location would have guided first readers to interpret them as enquiries into other arts—music and graphic or plastic representation. Music is an abstract art precluding mimesis, appealing only to the ear, devoted to a Beauty to which Truth is irrelevant. So the "Ode to a Nightingale" features a symbolic artist, the bird, which is unconscious of any audience, and pours forth a song to a listener who is physically so passive as to be near-insentient. This is a view of the aesthetic act wholly different from that of "To Psyche," since it plays down the constructing artist, and thus art's conceptual and moral content. Art is a world of daydream with which we in our social and mortal world can only briefly have commerce, a conclusion powerfully supported by the poem's shape—"its drugged entrance and its aversion from the spectacle of suffering, its central dark obliteration of consciousness, its reliance on the sensual ear, its banishing of the brain, its journey homeward to habit-

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ual self, and its blighted exit from sensation and beauty into thought and selfhood."

With the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats turns away from contemplating art-as-music, a view that makes it both sensuous and abstract, to consider an art which, being representational, itself directly engages with the passions and sufferings of men. Here he abandons (for good, Vendler says) the idea of a spontaneous and socially indifferent art; the artist's work as represented on the urn has a social purpose and is "deliberate and arduous—the art of the sculptor's chisel, not the art of a singing bird." The poet-in-the-poem is awake and thoughtful, not content to take in the urn's beauty with his eye, but analyzing its message with his conceiving mind. Interrogation, "the trope par excellence of the questioning mind," takes precedence over "Nightingale" 's reiteration, "the intensifying trope of pure sensation." In a brilliant and original discussion of the poem's structure, Vendler suggests that the dialogue between onlooker and urn raises in turn three hypotheses about the aesthetic experience—first, that art tells a story about people other than ourselves, a naive mimetic conception; second, that it conveys a universal and archetypal "Truth," so that it represents not others but, allegorically, ourselves; third, that it does neither of these things, but establishes a self-contained world "which asks from us an empathetic identification supremely free both of factual enquiry and of self-interest." With this third proposition, the subject of the poem's fourth stanza, Keats arrives at his highest view of art. The difficult fifth stanza considers the implications, in propositional language appropriate to the onlooker's play of mind; the urn reminds men of the extent and sufficiency of their knowledge, not of their visions and dreams. And so the emphasis has fallen decidedly upon intellectuality, for Keats has resolved that Sensation must coexist with Thought, Beauty with Truth. "In removing itself from the rapt visual and emotional awe of the first stanza, in recalling its own state of sexual woe, in foreseeing its own end in the wasting of its generation, in deciding on its final austere, intellectual epithets for the urn and in putting words into the urn's mouth, the mind of the last stanza represents itself as finally the master of its aesthetic experience, which it can recall at will, speculate on, and find a language (however imperfect) for."

Vendler has thus been thinking of the series as a progress, a conception which lands her in some difficulty when she arrives at the "Ode on Melancholy"; even she has to concede that this poem's effects are sometimes grotesque. But she sturdily insists that, in spite of some blemishes, Keats maintains his onward impetus. He now admits the "lower senses"—notably taste—to his world of higher forms, his poet plays an active rather than a passive or conceptualising part, and the result is an argued relationship between psychological experience and aesthetic form. Vendler sees the experiences of the first two stanzas, which are immediately those of a lover rath-

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er than of a poet, as oscillating, violent and, in the second stanza especially, predatory and unreal. The last stanza arrives at an equilibrium, so that the poem as a whole takes a view of art less bitter and more generalized than that of "Nightingale." By differentiating between responses to art which are worthy and unworthy, "Melancholy" ends by admitting that moral dimension which Vendler considers to have been absent from the view of art advanced in the first three Odes. "In its final recognition of the mixed nature of all joy, pleasure and delight, of the inevitability of death in human experience, and of the presence of the metaphysical in the existential, it prepares the way for *Autumn*."

The "Ode to Autumn" appears here, inevitably, as the finest of the Odes and the maturest in its account of creativity and art. To encompass its richness, Vendler allows herself two preliminary excursions outside her hitherto tight scheme, discussions first of Keats's own *Fall of Hyperion*, second of the poems by other poets, especially Spenser and Milton, which "To Autumn" echoes. These passages are perhaps less original and less coherent in the present enterprise than the close analyses which follow of the Ode's structure, language and central mythopoeic presence, the figure of Autumn herself. Vendler writes with marvellous precision on the poem's orchestration of five large effects—"the successive seasonal blooming and harvesting over time, the spatial expansion from cottage to horizon, the sequence of the single prototypical day, the change in field of imagery, and the disappearance of the personified figure of the season." The female goddess of the second stanza brings to mind Spenser's Nature and Milton's Eve; the girl sitting careless on a granary floor is like Proserpina before her abduction.

> On the other hand, goddesses do not reap furrows or carry burdens or press apples; and in spite of the arrested motion here, it is certainly the figure in the landscape who has reaped the half-furrow, and it is her hook, as she sleeps, that spares the next swath . . . Eve only gardens and gathers; she is never pictured as one reaping, with the power to spare or end the life of the corn (lopping and pruning enhance the life of the plant, they do not end it), nor is she pictured as changing the substance of any of her gathered plenty by force (as the cider-press crushes the apples). . . . If Keats's poem is not about the natural process left to itself but about human harvest interrupting that process, we touch, in the appearance of this figure, Keats's most intimate conviction that nature herself would assent, if with reluctance, to the harvesting of her beauties and her amplitudes, rather than see their abandonment to the wind and the weather and their natural fate. But her will to harvest meets her knowledge, expressed in the scene in the granary, that it is she herself who is winnowed; and so her scythe stops in mid-motion. By awakening his figure; by returning her, laden, across the brook; by stationing her, in

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her own passion, next to the last drops of harvest pressing, Keats makes her the participant in, and witness to, her own willed death.

Autumn is a new sort of goddess, "one who is available to all of us because she is ourselves in our labour," a reproof to Christian incarnational myth and Christian sacrificial suffering in that she has incarnated herself "out of that divine affinity between man and nature of which Keats was so sure." In considering her story, Keats both adopts a Muse, as he does with Psyche, Melancholy and Moneta, "and retells the story of the fertility and death of the mother, which, otherwise considered, is the story of the origins and growth to adulthood of the child." The Ode recalls the infant crying in the night at its mother's death, and also converts grief "into something that can legitimately be called not wailing or mourning or bleating but song." It is on account of its rise to the objectivity of the Orphic voice that Vendler can see in *Autumn* the fit conclusion of Keats's series: "the musical art of the nightingale and the sculptural art of the urn are both triumphantly enclosed within the art of verbal lyric."

Vendler's book will become, and deserves to become, *the* book on Keats's Odes. That is not to say that her method works equally well at all points, for no method ever does that. Her theme of a steady progress from ode to ode obliges her not only to overrate "Melancholy" but, more seriously, to underrate the first group, "Indolence," "Psyche" and "Nightingale." The real casualty of Vendler's book is perhaps the "Ode to Psyche," an important and beautiful poem which it is surely wrong to represent as a "novice effort." But since the underestimate of "Psyche" arises not so much from the book's structure as from the methodology which determined that structure, we should notice what principles operate in that discussion, and what kind of consideration finds no place there. Vendler's analysis of "Psyche" emphasises the poem's formality, and claims that the "life" of the first half is duplicated by the "art" of the second half. As if the simplicity of such an interpretation were not damaging enough, Vendler seems to derive further derogatory judgments of "Psyche" from this one. She notes that in the first stanza Keats depicts Cupid and Psyche after coition, their erotic desire unabated; from this she concludes, having determined that the first stanza was intended to be natural, that this tableau is an instance of pure idealization, untrue to human experience. If the second stanza really is about the cult of Psyche in history, it risks seeming antiquarian and over-externalized. If the rhapsodic fourth stanza really subscribes to the Puritan intent of celebrating the mind over the senses, its rhetoric is inappropriate in more ways than one, for it is not only luxuriantly erotic but tastelessly decorative, all buds, stars and bells. A Puritan who compares a working brain with a wreathed trellis cannot be in command of what he is doing.

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"Psyche" is a weak pastoral if Vendler is right about what it says, and if she is right to claim that Milton's dismissal of the gods provides the poem with an adequate occasion. But on neither point does her hypothesis seem very plausible. If there has to be a single precursor-text, it is not, surely, any poem by Milton, but Apuleius' version of the Cupid and Psyche story in *The Golden Ass*, which was much in vogue among Leigh Hunt's friends in 1817, and which had been interpreted by Thomas Taylor in 1795 as an allegory of the alienated soul imprisoned in the flesh. Nor can it be right to associate the first two stanzas simply with life. Each evokes a separate *fiction*, the first stanza the famous love-story (which could be read secularly), the second the "mystery" which pagan worshippers, anticipating Taylor, might have made of Cupid and Psyche. In the letter to George and Georgiana Keats in which he first copied "Psyche," Keats also writes of how men have fictively created their religions, either by personifying abstractions (the pagan practice) or, as with Christianity, by inventing "more palpable and Personal schemes of Redemption . . . their Christ, their Oromanes, their Vishnu." It is not life at all that these two stanzas are concerned with, but the projection of idealisms, for which Religion is one word, Art another. But, at the same time as he alludes to these fictive processes, Keats challenges them. The first stanza describes a scene, after coition in broad daylight, which never happens in the Psyche myth as related by Apuleius; Keats has at once claimed the right to reinvent the story as he chooses, thus stressing the fictionality of the first version, and also of his own. According to Apuleius, Psyche in the flesh could love Cupid only furtively in the dark, in a fanciful palace of his making, and it is on these guilty connotations that Taylor bases his ascetic allegorical interpretation. Similarly, as Keats plainly observes, Apuleian Psyche came too late in time—the second century of the Christian era—to become the object of a new pagan cult. So Vendler's supposed historical event in the second stanza is again doubly a fiction, the poet fantasizing about religious myth-making that never happened.

What is the point of such sophisticated play with a source, such mischievous interference with the reader's "knowledge" of "how it was"? Far from naively repeating his earlier pastoral manner, or losing us in an otherworldly "mode of enchantment," as Hartman has recently proposed, Keats is surely here vigorously challenging, by rewriting, a version of reality in which the ideal is separated from the real, the soul or psyche from the body. Both the Apuleian Psyche-story in particular, and institutionalized religion in general, deny sexuality; Keats counters by insinuating that conventional asceticism rests at last upon sublimation:

> Nor Virgin choir to make delicious moan
> Upon the midnight hours . . .
> No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
> Of pale-mouthed prophet dreaming . . .

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The "duplication" of the second half is achieved by the aggressive and unmannerly intrusion of the poet into the religious sanctuary:

> . . . I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.
> So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
> Upon the midnight hours . . .
> Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
> Of pale-mouthed prophet dreaming.

Here the "moan upon the midnight hours" is unmistakably and triumphantly sexual. Psyche and the poet will use the shrine for the purpose that Psyche and Cupid used the palace, but unfurtively, with window open and lamp burning; in Keats's new cult, sexuality is sanctified rather than condemned.

The rhapsodic last stanza does indeed describe a landscape of dark-clustered trees and mountain ridges, surrounding the rosy sanctuary of artifice, but it seems needlessly unsympathetic to accuse the poet of muddle. Since idealisms are self-created, Keats claims, they need not be exclusive: he can allow the wide quietness and the fane, the delight of realised pleasure and the hints of ambivalence carried in words like "feigning," "breeding," "pleasant pain." The extravagant paradoxes of the last stanza become a grandiose assertion of what the single mind can do, and it is ironically more than what "everyone's" religion does. Keats has emerged as the triumphant reviser of the received version of the Psyche myth, as bold a misreader as is Shelley with the Genesis myth in *Prometheus Unbound*. Though a construct of Keats's "shadowy thought," Psyche loses both her insubstantiality as an immortal, and the moralistic constraints and taboos that predetermined the course of her original story.

Helen Vendler observes, wisely, that a work answers the questions that have been put to it. Her questions to "Psyche" seem unduly narrow, partly because they are questions for a series culminating triumphantly in "Autumn," and partly because her own aesthetic predilections, which are those of modern neo-Romanticism, do not fullheartedly uphold the ethical, social, activist and intellectual preferences she discerns in Keats. She traces a movement in the Odes away from the senses, abstraction and aestheticism, and towards representational art, which means a larger role for social awareness and ethical responsibility. But "Psyche," early in the series, also makes an intellectualist statement about art, of an uncomfortable kind, when it challenges abstract, ascetic, bloodless idealisms, communal as opposed to private fictions. "Psyche" is a polemical poem, surely meant to shock; as is "Nightingale," with its comfortless view of art. Could it be that Vendler rates both relatively low because she feels personally committed to a more sanguine view, art as harmonious and socially responsible?

At the beginning of her book Vendler promises to pay attention

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to a poem's erasures and suppressions, but she seems to find fewer of these as she progresses towards "Autumn." Jerome J. McGann has pointed out[2] some of the things a reader might have felt, on "Autumn"'s first appearance, that the poem didn't say. It appeared in a collection, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820), which is itself notable for erasures and suppressions: it omits two Keats poems which had been published under the pseudonym "Caviare" in Leigh Hunt's *Indicator*—"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and the sonnet on Dante's Paolo and Francesca, "As Hermes once took to his feathers light." Since the attacks on *Endymion* as "Cockney" in the Tory press, Keats had avoided being publicly associated with Hunt, because it meant that his poetry would be represented as vulgar and politically tendentious. He had also modified his style, and McGann comments that "To Autumn" seems designed more clearly than any other poem in the 1820 collection to gain public acceptance and allay conflict. The autumn in question was the autumn after Peterloo, an event which prompted Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind" to make of the revolution of the year a metaphor for world revolution. Keats's "Autumn", which portrays the cycle of the life of individuals—birth, maturation and death—at one with the cycle of Nature, turns aside from the current vein of Shelley and Byron as surely as it moves away from early Keats.

Even more remarkable is the change that takes place in "Autumn" in the range of suggestion conveyed by the figure of the Muse. In poems written earlier in the same year, Keats's supernatural women are erotic: La Belle Dame and Lamia, like Psyche, can still be seen as opening some kind of ideological attack upon the reader, since they preside over worlds of sexual pleasure, beauty and imaginative freedom, and are opposed by characters like Apollonius, speaking up for repressions and taboos which the Christian reader would share. Autumn's shapeshifting, from Eve-Proserpina into a human working woman and mother, is accepted on its own terms by Vendler, who nowhere observes that it is also a swerve away from abrasiveness. Not that her own omission here is surprising. In moving from a poetic style which at least intermittently implies an engaged, critical, intellectualist role for poetry, to one which views poetry as a contained artifact aspiring to timeless oneness with Nature, Keats anticipated the taste of late nineteenth-century aesthetes and of neo-Romantic modernists. It is they, much more generally than Keats's own generation, who propose an art-world dreamily disengaged from objects and unruffled by ideas, what John Bayley has called "the queer ghost world" of Wallace Stevens and his successors.

All of which in fact supports Vendler in her central contention, that Keats modulates his approach to the arts from ode to ode. What isn't so clear is that change necessarily means progress.

[2] *Modern Language Notes* 94 (1979).

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MICHAEL GORRA

Laughter and Bloodshed

"Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind" runs the title of one of Tennyson's lesser anthology pieces, a title that might stand for that of Cynthia Ozick's elegant new novel.[1] Her protagonist Joseph Brill is a French Jew, a survivor of the Holocaust who has become the headmaster of a progressive primary school in the Midwest. He is proud of his school's "Dual Curriculum," which combines Judaic tradition and Western thought, but he has also become suspicious of the way the school is tucked "in the breast pocket of the continent, pouched and crouched in inwardness. It was as though it had a horror of coasts and margins; of edges and extremes of any sort." He sees that "middleness" reflected in the mediocrity of the school's architecture—and worries that it might be a reflection of his own suspected mediocrity as well.

Brill seeks his justification in the education of a prodigy, a genius who will redeem the years he has spent teaching the children of the suburban physicians he contemptuously calls "plumbers," and hopes that Beulah Lilt, whose mother Hester has an international reputation as a linguistic philosopher, will provide that redemption for him. But the withdrawn, slow Beulah fails him, for Brill's school believes intelligence lies in quickness and the memorization of fact after fact. She fails him—and then turns out to be a genius after all, a celebrated painter whose abilities the school has entirely missed, and who claims, in a television interview Brill watches in old age, to have no memory whatsoever of her early education. Too neat? Only as "The Beast in the Jungle" is too neat, predictable in its simplicity but transformed by its prose:

> He took in, with no reservations, that she was not one of the bright ones, and just then the pang, the sensation, the almost-animal that ran in warm paws alongside his liver, made him know again his discovery. His condition was immortality. His discovery was its horror. He did not attempt to draw Gorchak [a young teacher] into this cold knowledge; how year after year it was the same, the first graders so tender-mouthed and little, the eighth grade girls puffed up beneath their white dresses in the long procession down the glowing hill; spring after spring after spring. Nothing moved. Nothing altered. The first grade was always the

[1] THE CANNIBAL GALAXY, by *Cynthia Ozick*. Knopf. $11.95.

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> first grade, the eighth grade always the eighth. The same, the same, the same. For this the nuns had kept him alive. For this the hayloft had kept him alive. Nature replaces, replaces identically, replaces chillingly.

Ozick's prose startles me with its beauty, a beauty that lies not so much in the bright bombast of a particular phrase as in rhythm, in the repetition of words and the placement of commas and periods and semicolons. Her ironic prose carries the cold, precise beauty of the astronomy in which Brill was first trained, but its coldness is qualified by sympathy; sympathy for a man keen enough to suspect that, as Hester Lilt says, he has "stopped too soon," settled for the second-rate. Brill can imagine what it would be like to have something more, and is horrified by the unendingness of what he does have. A cannibal galaxy is one that swallows small groups of stars, which "rotate like a Jonah-Dervish inside the Cannibal, while the sated ogre-galaxy, its gaseous belly stretched, soporific, never spins at all—motionless as digesting death." Ozick employs that image in different ways throughout the novel, but its final application is to Brill's relationship with himself, swallowed by a vision he lacks the will to fill, shattered and confused by the knowledge that while worshiping genius he has failed to recognize it. Ozick's judgment of him is hard, but her final note is not one of condemnation but of pity, and *The Cannibal Galaxy* is the best American novel I've read this year.

Philip Roth, on the other hand, treats his protagonist Nathan Zuckerman with something that is both more and less than pity. Roth must by now wish for reviewers who don't have his career at their fingertips, and so consider each book as it comes without asking if in it he is finally living up to whatever it is he's supposed to live up to. Such spontaneity is, however, impossible in considering the last book of a trilogy about a writer whose life is a distortion of the author's own.[2] *The Anatomy Lesson*'s strengths and weaknesses are precisely those that characterize Roth's work as a whole. What's to admire in it is the skill with which Roth manages his narrative. "When he is sick," the novel begins,

> every man wants his mother; if she's not around, other women must do. Zuckerman was making do with four other women. He'd never had so many women at one time, or so many doctors, or drunk so much vodka, or done so little work, or known despair of such wild proportions. Yet he didn't have a disease that anybody could take seriously.

Instead Zuckerman has what most people regard him as—an enormous "pain in the neck," whose cause no doctor can find, and whose corollary is a bout of writer's block now in its second year.

[2] THE ANATOMY LESSON, by *Philip Roth*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $14.95.

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The first hundred pages of the novel are almost entirely exposition, an explanation of the way Zuckerman got to be in the situation those introductory sentences describe. Scene blends into scene, flashback into flashback, so neatly that it's impossible to tell which of the four women in his "harem" signed on first. Everything returns to the opening sentences—until, after an attack upon him in a magazine Roth openly models on *Commentary*, Zuckerman announces that he has had it with writing and is going to become a gynecologist instead.

Zuckerman's problem is the realist's old dilemma between life and art, action and passivity. He wants his life to be "colossal":

> But what had become colossal was the next page. He thought he had chosen life but what he had chosen was the next page. Stealing time to write stories, he never thought to wonder what time might be stealing from him . . . . Inherent in this choice was a paradox he had never foreseen.

Medical school seems to Zuckerman everything that writing novels is not, an acceptance of life rather than avoidance of it. "My son, the doctor," the old joke goes, and Zuckerman, his parents both dead, decides to confront his guilt over having hurt them with his books by accepting the cliché. One reads Roth precisely for that ballsy, stagey jokiness, and I laughed aloud at the novel's concluding spectacle of Zuckerman roaming around a hospital, still suffering from his pain in the neck, and trying to cut himself free from "the corpus that was his," as the book's punning last words put it. But one-liners, like Joseph Brill, stop too soon. Such an easy target as Zuckerman isn't finally a very satisfying subject, even if it is the only one Roth's own problems with Zuckerman's paradox have left him, and in the end one wants something more than the seamless web of jokes after irrepressible joke that Roth spins around him.

Roth is aware of that difficulty. He tells his readers over and over that Zuckerman's worries are, in fact, laughable; trivial compared to the real thing. He makes Jaga, Zuckerman's number two mistress, a Polish refugee whose problems are supposed to reveal the self-indulgence that lies behind Zuckerman's own. He even makes Zuckerman himself bemoan the way in which other people are only "grist to my mill." Yet Roth's heart isn't in his character's comeuppance; Zuckerman's anxieties about art seem to free Roth from the need for his own. He doesn't bother to make Jaga interesting in herself, and so her situation doesn't undercut Zuckerman's self-absorption but paradoxically justifies it. It is as if he says, "Yes, life in America *is* soft. Well, that lets me off the hook, and you, too, Nathan Zuckerman, because you're as smart as I am." One comes away feeling that Roth is too much in love with own ability to make a joke to feel the limitations of his material in any more than a perfunctory way. *The Anatomy Lesson* is a facile novel only partially redeemed by its

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concluding suggestion that Zuckerman will come to accept his enchainment and go on to write the first-person *The Ghost Writer* (1979), easily the best book in the trilogy Roth has devoted to him. But what will Roth himself do next? Ah . . .

I want to see what Pat Barker does next too, though for entirely different reasons. Barker has the rare ability to communicate the physical, to make one feel her characters living, feel "the blood squeezing through [their] veins" in the way that Lawrence wanted for his own characters. Her first book is an almost hellish cycle of seven stories about the working-class women who live along the Union Street of the title, in an unnamed city in the North of England.[3] But sex is more important than class here. Barker writes about a crucial stage in the life of a different woman in each story. But she uses the woman's experience to embody a segment of the collective experience of the sex as a whole, from childhood to old age, producing a feminine version of Marcel Marceau's pantomime in the process, whose effect is intensified by the fact that each of the women knows the other six, and appears in their stories as well as her own. Barker's characters are dominated by biology, by the sheer fact of being female. Their relations with men are essentially violent, for both men and women in *Union Street* lack an adequate emotional language and so despise one another, turning physical life into an indignity in the process. In the novel's second section the pregnant and unmarried Joanne Wilson stands with her boyfriend in a tunnel beneath a railway overpass that is famous as a spot for quick sex:

> Ken was panting, and thrusting into her as though he hated her, grinding and screwing and banging hard enough to hurt. She was afraid for the baby and immediately knew what he was trying to do: he was trying to screw it out of her. She went cold, pressing herself back against the wall, but he fastened on to her with a terrible monotonous power.
>
> There was something exciting in being used like this, in giving way to this impersonal, machine-like passion. For a moment she let herself relax, and his flesh bit into her like steel.
>
> The goods train clanked and rumbled overhead, no longer roaring, but deadly and monotonous. She could see in her mind's eye the oiled pistons moving round. And round. Almost matching the thrusts of Ken's bum. With deadly corrosive hatred she began to move against him, imposing upon him the rhythm of the train, which was at first exciting, and then terrible and then, abruptly, ridiculous, so that he lost his erection and slid ignobly out of her.

Nothing makes the quality of Joanne's life more clear to me than the fact that for her sex is something that has to happen outside,

[3] UNION STREET, by *Pat Barker*. G.P. Putnam's Sons. $13.95.

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even in winter, because there is nowhere else for unmarried couples to go. The impersonality of their encounter is the norm rather than the exception in this novel, an impersonality whose force, gathered over the seven stories, redeems a phrase like "bit into her like steel" from cliché—not least because steel is the main product of the city in which they live. *The New Statesman* called *Union Street* on its publication in England "the long-overdue working class masterpiece," but such pigeonholing, however well-intentioned, is inadequate to Barker's work, and limits its audience—as does the equally likely description of it as a feminist novel. Barker's sense of physical violence at the core of everyday life seems to me too strong, too obsessive to proceed from any political position. It is so honestly come by that for me the inextricability of sex and violence in *Union Street* is harrowing rather than morbid. *Union Street* is too relentless for one to be "happy" while reading it. But something in me both likes and admires Barker's ability to move and appall me, and my eagerness for her next book has nothing of the vulture about it.

Union Street, to twist around Irving Howe's words on Raymond Carver in *The New York Times Book Review*, reveals a segment of English experience few writers trouble to notice. But I'm not so sure that one can legitimately apply those terms to Carver's own work, at least not in the way that Howe means.[4] Carver has been so extravagantly admired in the last few years that an encounter with his work becomes an encounter with his critics as well, and it seems important to question the terms those critics have used. Do his admittedly deft stories face up, as Howe says they do, to "the waste and destructiveness that prevail beneath the affluence of American life"? Carver is the chief practitioner of what's been called "American minimalism," a mannerist mode in which the intentional poverty, the anorexia, of the writer's style is mimetic of the spiritual poverty of his or her characters' lives, their disconnection from anything like a traditional community. It is a prose so attenuated that it can't support the weight of a past or a future, but only a bare notation of what happens, now; a "slice of life" in which the characters are seen without the benefit of antecedents or social context. They rarely have last names.

Such a world is confusing, not just for a reader who expects characters to come with surnames, but for the characters themselves. If nothing can be expected on the basis of the past, then each new moment can bewilder a character, freeze him or her into a confusion of inaction. Carver in particular is famous for the passivity with which his characters confront, or fail to confront, their experience. "Preservation" in this volume stands for me as the archetypal Carver story. Sandy's husband has been unemployed for three months and no longer bothers to look for work. He spends his days on the sofa, waiting for her to come home from her own job. One afternoon Sandy finds that the refrigerator has lost its Freon. She

[4] CATHEDRAL, by *Raymond Carver*. Knopf. $13.95.

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unloads the contents of the freezer onto the kitchen table where, as the food defrosts, a puddle forms and slowly begins to drip onto the floor:

> She looked down at her husband's bare feet. She stared at his feet next to the pool of water. She knew she'd never again in her life see anything so unusual. But she didn't know what to make of it yet. She thought she'd better put on some lipstick, get her coat, and go ahead to the auction. But she couldn't take her eyes from her husband's feet. She put her plate on the table and watched until the feet left the kitchen and went back into the living room.

And the story ends. Yet why should it end there? It is in no way an ending in their lives; dinner still has to be eaten, the floor mopped, the auction attended. Their lives will presumably continue in precisely the same way. What makes this extremely thin slice better than one further down the loaf, what makes Carver's choice of an ending anything more than arbitrary? What makes the sight of her husband's foot next to a puddle "the most interesting thing" Sandy will ever see? What makes this moment count? To answer that one would need to know, with far more specificity than Carver provides, how Sandy feels about her husband's unemployment, her own job, her own life. One needs the details of her personal history even if her feelings about that history are confused and inarticulate. For this ending to work one needs the social detail, the context, that Carver's deliberately undersuggestive prose won't provide, and the story collapses under the weight of its own crust.

Carver doesn't persuade me that life is this pregnant with emptiness because in reading I feel that his style, like that of most minimalists, dictates rather than embodies his characters' predicament. Carver's fiction is entirely without the mingled sense of possibility and inevitability that seems to me essential for short fiction—the sense that out of all the things that could happen, this one has. Everything for which his minimalism has been praised coalesces into the negation of that sense. His stories both take place in and are mimetic of a vacuum, a vacuum based upon the elision at the center of his work. He writes almost exclusively about alcoholics, or about characters who, even when they don't drink, have the responses and desperation of alcoholics. That subject explains the absence of the quality I've described above, explains the seeming randomness of his world, in which every moment is a painful ending and none a new beginning. For Carver's characters all the choices have been made long before the story begins. What we read is an enactment of their consequences, an enactment that will be repeated again and again. The "slice of life" metaphor is in this case grimly appropriate.

The difficulty is that Carver is rarely open about his subject. He doesn't hide the whiskey bottles, but he does avoid naming the nar-

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row range within which his work lies, and so leaves himself open both to an interpretation of the sort Howe performs upon him, and to a criticism of the sort I've mounted above. It's difficult, in reading Carver, to know the degree to which he's attempted to extend these very private stories into public terms, the degree to which he intends alcoholism to provide a statement about American life as a whole. I suspect that such an extension is largely a product of his supporters' attempt to couple American minimalism to their own political programs, while minimalism's harshest critics (e.g. *The New Criterion*) have attacked that coupling in the service of their programs as well. Certainly Carver hasn't indulged in the false historicity of such statements as "This was in 1972, in Philadelphia," with which Ann Beattie concluded a story in *Secrets and Surprises*. I still don't like his aesthetic. I see no reason why alcoholics can't have last names (Sandy's husband doesn't even have a first one.) But the odd and encouraging thing about Carver's work is that when he is open about his subject his prose does carry a density of detail that allows it to graze the edge of the terms with which Howe sees him. "Where I'm Calling From" describes a week spent at a "drying out facility" and possesses an unsentimental yet tender awareness of the world his characters have lost. It is easily the best story in this collection, and makes me think that if he confronted his subject he might in fact manage to turn the alcoholic into Everyman.

The model of the short story upon which I've based my criticism of Carver comes largely out of my reading of William Trevor. Trevor's work seems to be the exact opposite of Carver's, even when he writes about a world marked by some of the same qualities. In "Teresa's Wedding" he describes a wedding that's everything such an occasion shouldn't be. The bride is pregnant but doesn't know her husband well or even like him much. The best man confides to the groom that once, in a field after a dance, he'd had "a bloody great ride" on a willing Teresa. The only happy guest is the village priest, who "persuaded Artie of his duty." But Artie isn't happy with his duty and, drunk on stout, asks his wife about her night with his friend. It is a scene so bleak that in the last paragraph Trevor can write, with complete honesty, that

> for a moment as Teresa stood there, the last moment before she left the lounge-bar, she felt that she and Artie might make some kind of marriage together because there was nothing that could be destroyed, no magic or anything else. He could ask her the question he had asked, while she stood there in her wedding dress; he could ask her and she could truthfully reply, because there was nothing special about the occasion, or the lounge-bar all covered in confetti.

If the bareness of Carver's style is a constraint upon his characters, then the simplicity of Trevor's is a medium through which the pov-

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erty of Teresa's life can speak directly. It is an instrument that can do justice both to her own desperation, and to the social world out of which that desperation is born.

Trevor has two books out this season, a novel and an 800-page omnibus edition of his five volumes of stories.[5] I've had a whack at *Fools of Fortune* elsewhere (*The Boston Review*, Dec. 1983) but want to return to it briefly because the conjunction of its publication with that of the omnibus makes clear the way in which, as Trevor has said in interviews, he begins a novel by sticking bits and pieces of his old work together to see what happens. *Fools of Fortune* reads as if it were a summation, almost a codification, of the themes, characters, and situations with which he has worked in his short fiction over the last twenty years. The novel deals, over a period of six decades, with the effects upon an Anglo-Irish family of the Troubles that followed World War I, and so immediately recalls one of his best stories, "Attracta." But it opens at a mill in the country ("Mr. Macnamara"); has a long sequence set at a boarding school ("Mr. Macnamara" again, and also "A School Story," "Torridge," and others); a character who retreats into an imaginary world and is taken for mad ("A Happy Family," "Mr. Higgs," and "Mrs. Acland's Ghosts"); and a country house whose ruins Trevor uses, as successfully as any British writer of the century, to suggest a process of historical change ("Matilda's England"). All writers, of course, return to the same material, the same obsessions—how many hunted men has Graham Greene written about? What separates Trevor from them is the openness with which he borrows from himself, an openness possible because he has an extraordinary range of settings, characters, and situations to draw upon, and weighs and employs them all so equally that none of them seem obsessive in the least. No hunted man—or unemployed alcoholic for that matter—takes precedence over the rest of the world, and so his work never seems repetitive or stale, no matter how many times he uses a particular device. Part of the fun, in fact, comes from seeing him reshape an element of an old story to fit the needs of the work at hand. The pleasures of reading Trevor are therefore cumulative. One delights in an almost tactile sense of his pleasure in craft, in using characters and situations as a painter does his colors or brushes, combining and recombining the familiar elements of his art with a practiced, confident ease.

If Trevor does have an obsession to which the rest of his work is subordinated, it lies in the title of his last novel, *Other People's Worlds*—in his concern with the way that one character collides with and attempts to impose himself upon the discrete, self-enclosed world of another. The imposition is sometimes physical or sexual, sometimes a lie, sometimes a bare account of the truth. In "Torridge" three old school friends, Arrowsmith, Mace-Hamilton,

[5] FOOLS OF FORTUNE, by *William Trevor*. Viking. $13.95. THE STORIES OF WILLIAM TREVOR, by *William Trevor*. Penguin. $8.95p.

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and Wiltshire, gather with their wives and children for dinner in a restaurant. As the meal draws on toward coffee, Arrowsmith announces that he has asked their contemporary Torridge to join them, Torridge who "at thirteen had a face with a pudding look matching the sound of his name" and who is still the butt of their jokes even though none of them have seen him in decades. When "old Porridge" appears, however, he has a "step as nimble as a tap dancer's" and "a brittle snap of a smile that came and went in a matter-of-fact way . . . his hand was cool and bony; they felt it should have been plump." He orders Chartreuse, and then calmly tells the assembled wives and children that "I'm what they call queer . . . I perform sexual acts with men." And he proceeds, in revenge for his school days, to tell about the times when their husbands and fathers, in the best public-school tradition, did the same thing. Some of Trevor's early stories in this vein are too heavily stylized in a manner that suggests Ivy Compton-Burnett, rhythmic litanies of insistent hatred. This story is quiet enough to succeed, its revelations delivered with an understatement perfectly matched to its grim comedy. Torridge finishes the evening with the announcement that a boy who hadn't returned to school one term had actually killed himself because Arrowsmith wouldn't answer his love letters, and walks away. The wives and children dissolve in tears, and in his last sentence Trevor twists the story away, as Mrs. Mace-Hamilton turns to the three men and tells them "they should be ashamed of themselves, allowing all this to happen"—as if they could have prevented it except by being entirely different men from the ones they are.

"Torridge" sets a pattern for those stories Trevor places in England, where he now lives, and "Teresa's Wedding" for those in Ireland, where he was born. His Irish stories are quieter and softer than his English ones, less cold and clipped and more open to heartbreak. I can't choose between them. Not all of the sixty stories here are successful; perhaps a dozen aren't, while something more than twice that can stand with the best short fiction of the century. William Trevor is, with John Updike, the only master of the short story in English still in mid-career, and I only wish Viking-Penguin had had the grace first to publish this omnibus in the hardback its permanent value deserves.

Lynne Sharon Schwartz's third novel is this quarter's entrant in the Domestic Realism Sweepstakes, Upper West Side Division,[6] a long and messy book told in the first person by one Lydia Rowe, who at forty-two has four lovely children, a talented and successful husband, her own increasingly satisfying career as a chamber pianist, and a Volvo. She keeps up with her college friends, thinks about the pre-Socratic philosophers she read as a freshman at Barnard, and has settled comfortably into a present in which she be-

[6] DISTURBANCES IN THE FIELD, by *Lynne Sharon Schwartz*. Harper & Row. $15.95.

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lieves she has attained the "placidity that comes with the relief of growing up and believing that nothing wonderful or terrible will ever happen to you again." So guess what happens in the next chapter? No, it's not as macabre as it was in *The World According to Garp*. The accident happens offstage, only two of her children are involved, and they even get to die instantly and presumably without pain. In the aftermath Lydia becomes cold and competent and inhuman enough to describe her husband in these terms:

> Victor seems distant, abstract. He is a sexy man who has suffered severe misfortune. This view, I know, is unfashionable. What is fashionable is not objectivity but self-help, with solipsism as its informing vision and realpolitik for technique.

Huh? No wonder Victor leaves her for "the embrace of some fat old mama." Schwartz's narrator is so would-be-ironical about fashionable "lifestyles"—and so completely a sucker for them. Lydia's college friend George, now a therapist, provides the novel's title. "Disturbances in the field" take place when "something gets between the expressed need on the one hand and the response on the other. So the need doesn't receive the proper response and the transaction remains unfinished." One part of life gets in the way of another. The death of her children interferes with her relationship with her husband.

Well, of course! But for Lydia the inescapable dangers of social life, not just in the extremity of a child's death but on an everyday basis as well, are shrouded by a vocabulary that is meant to express them but instead anesthetizes them. How do you "act out" your feelings about the death of a child? Lydia tries to be ironic about the psycho-babble, but really, what does Victor's sexiness have to do with his feelings about the death of his children? And Schwartz's own irony fails as well; she too is a prisoner of George's terminology. Her fundamental problem, which she shares with most American novelists-of-manners, is that her work is born of a psychological comfort that it never quite manages to criticize. It comes from a world in which people assume that self-fulfillment is a right rather than the product of luck and privilege, assume that life should work the way in which they want it to, and look to terms like George's to fix things up when it doesn't. That world is so fundamentally safe that, once having accepted its terms in the slightest degree, a writer has to become sensational in order to evoke a situation for which those terms are patently inadequate. I'd rather read Barbara Pym.

The subject matter of Ron Hansen's second novel is by definition sensational.[7] His treatment of it is not. Hansen collapses the glory days of the James gang into one long chapter, and concentrates in-

[7] THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD, by *Ron Hansen*. Knopf. $14.95.

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stead on the last months of Jesse James's life, and in particular on his relationship with his accomplice and eventual killer Robert Ford, a nineteen-year-old fed on dime novels, who is an equal partner with James in this novel, as he never was in life. Killing James made Ford the most famous man in the country, Hansen writes—but famous in the words of a music hall song as "that dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard"—James's alias at the time—and "laid Jesse James in his grave." And yet was he? Or is the title ironic? Liar, thief, braggart, murderer—vain, selfish, callow, all that, yes. A classic assassin, a nonentity so unattractive that his lust to be *somebody* demands attention. But he was also both smart enough and strong enough to engineer the surrender of other members of the gang, and feared that James might kill him as he had other accomplices inclined to free-lance. Was he a coward, to shoot the older man from behind? Perhaps no more so than James himself, who during a botched bank robbery in 1876 blew out the brains of an already unconscious cashier.

Hansen claimed this historical territory with his first novel, *Desperadoes*, about the Jameses' distant cousins, the Dalton gang, a novel that for sheer pull of story reminds me of *Kidnapped*. This is a slower, more ruminative novel, and one that despite the suspense Hansen summons in writing of the event ordained in its title, gets better the farther away it moves from that event. The novel's best pages describe Ford's life, years after the killing, as a saloon-owner in Colorado, yearning that he might be remembered for "more than a gunshot on April 3rd, 1882," and finally possessed of both the courage and the perverse dignity required to live with the fear of sudden death in a town where "despising Robert Ford had become a peculiar kind of sport."

The novel seems to me most exciting, however, just where one doesn't customarily expect a Western to be exciting: in the quality of its prose. Hansen's language is full of the weather, of the smells and sounds of the outdoors, of the mixed beauty and cruelty of the period he maps. As the James gang lay in wait for a train they intended to rob,

> shadows grew into giants and died as the sun turned a bright orange and sank. Mosquitoes flitted from hand to cheek until a night wind channelled east on the tracks and carried the insects away, even tore the ash of cigarettes and battened light coats over backs on the higher exposures. Clouds bricked overhead and were brindled pink, then crimson and violet; leaves sailed like paper darts and the air carried the tang of cattle and hogs and chimney smoke.

It could so easily be purple, but Hansen lets his characters' language shape his own, and so makes it carry a pictorial burden un-

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der which most contemporary prose would buckle. I admire its vigor and resonance, and Ron Hansen, like Pat Barker, is a writer to watch.

Hansen's novel is set just far enough in the past to be called an historical rather than a "true-life" or "nonfiction" novel. Salman Rushdie's new book flies much closer to contemporary history than Hansen's does, but the application of such a label to it is inconceivable.[8] *Shame* is in some small degree a *roman à clef* about the relationship between Pakistan's last two dictators, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia ul-Haq, but any *clef* is strictly secondary to Rushdie's consideration of Pakistan itself as a failed act of the imagination. The country's very name is an acronym, he writes, meant to denote the peoples and regions of its western portion—while ignoring the Bengalis who comprised the bulk of its population until the founding of Bangladesh. That irony makes the country's history grotesque from the start, and yet Rushdie hesitates before assaulting it. Its history, he says, is not quite his own: his family did not move from India to Pakistan until after he had begun his schooling in England, where he now lives. "Is history," he asks, in one of the many passages in his own voice interpolated into, and commenting on, *Shame*'s narrative line, "to be considered the property of the participants solely?" Well, perhaps—but if so, Rushdie can take certain liberties with it, can avoid "the real-life material" that would otherwise "become compulsory," in favor of a symbolic version. Rushdie's compromise with history is to write about a country that is "not quite" Pakistan, one that occupies the "same space" but exists at "a slight angle to reality," an angle that gives him the freedom upon which this "modern fairy tale" is predicated:

> In the remote border town of Q. [the novel begins], which when seen from the air resembles nothing so much as an ill-proportioned dumbbell, there once lived three lovely, and loving, sisters. Their names . . . but their real names were never used, like the best household china, which was locked away after the night of their joint tragedy in a cupboard whose location was eventually forgotten, so that the great thousand-piece service from the Gardner potteries in Tsarist Russia became a family myth in whose factuality they almost ceased to believe . . . the three sisters, I should state without further delay, bore the family name of Shakil, and were universally known (in descending order of age) as Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny.

Rushdie interrupts the "fairy tale" before one can be lulled by its familiarity, first with the dumbbell and then with the liberating entertainment of that mythical china service. His prose prances, a declaration of freedom, an assertion that *Shame* can be whatever he wants it to be, coy and teasing and ironic and brutal all at once.

[8] SHAME, by *Salman Rushdie*. Knopf. $13.95.

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He's been compared to Sterne, but the eighteenth-century novelist who comes to my mind is Fielding. To read Rushdie is to re-experience the novel as novel, as new, to recapture Fielding's claim, in *Tom Jones*, to be "the founder of a new province of writing [in which] I am at liberty to make what laws I please." *Shame* is, like *Tom Jones*, full of narrative games, a fiction about fiction that is nevertheless crammed, and finally most concerned with, the vibrant stuff of life.

Shame, like its predecessor *Midnight's Children*, hangs on the knife edge between comedy and horror.[9] Toward the end of the novel General Raza Hyder, dictator of the country Rushdie calls "Peccavistan," answers a journalist's question about his country's use of Islamic law:

> "Let me say, sir, that we are not some savages down from the trees, you see? We will not simply order people to stick out their hands, like this, and go fataakh! with a butcher's knife. No, sir. All will be done under the most hygienic conditions, with proper medical supervision, use of anaesthetic, etcetera."

Comedy and horror are here inseparable. The passage encapsulates the novel and yet is atypical of it as well. For *Shame* is not on the whole an exercise in black humor. Hyder's words suggest, rather, the extremes with which Rushdie deals, and the delicacy of his balance between them. If Rushdie never falls off the edge of the knife, the events he describes nearly always do, existing first on one side of it, now on the other. What begins as a joke develops into nightmare. General Hyder's mentally retarded daughter, Sufiya Zinobia, blushes at birth for shame at not having been the boy her parents wanted, and that blush looses the devouring Beast of Shame within her. Shame is for Rushdie a perversion of honor, calls honor's sense of self-worth into question, and attempts to re-assert it through violence. Shame turns Sufiya Zinobia into a more clearly seen version of *Midnight's Children*'s Major Shiva, into a juggernaut, a destroyer. As a child she tears, in a trance, the heads off two hundred turkeys that her family's neighbors are attempting to raise. As an adult, now entirely enslaved by the Beast, she rips the heads off men and women and eats their entrails, an embodiment of her father's bloody reign, and the means through which that reign ends. And as the Beast grows within her, a sense of horror begins, with a Fordian *progression d'effet*, to supplant the comedy in which Sufiya Zinobia,

[9] Comparison with *Midnight's Children* seems obligatory, but annoyingly so, and is therefore relegated to a footnote. *Shame* is shorter, tighter, more accessible, and without the occasional longeurs of its predecessor—but not finally so grand. Its relationship to *Midnight's Children* seems to me the same as that of García Márquez' *The Autumn of the Patriarch* to his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. One generally prefers the earlier book, but there is no question that both are works of great value.

[10] George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981).

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and the novel as a whole, were born. Pakistan's botched name becomes, in the glow of such destruction, something other than a joke.

Earlier reviewers of Rushdie's work have compared it to that of Grass, Kundera, and García Márquez. That conjunction of names suggests to me that perhaps one can finally begin to isolate a fictional mode that is to the late twentieth century what realism was to the nineteenth. Realism is or was an attempt to enact the belief that the way of the world is rational and sensible. It depends, as George Levine has argued, upon "the quietly dishonest assumption that the real world is not rife with extremes of action and feeling," and attempts to transform that world into "a subtly disguised version" of the form's own dreams and desires.[10] It is a form inextricable from liberalism, and as such has persisted in England and America. In the works of the writers I've named, among others, one can begin to see the outlines of a similar transformation, one springing from the fact that, as Joseph Epstein said in this space a year ago, "the great sad central experience of our century has been to live under one or another tyranny." Such tyranny seems to me far more responsible than any Joycean revolution for realism's decline internationally, and perhaps for its loss of confidence and amplitude in those countries where it is still the norm. For realism is impossible in such a world. Even Roth feels its inadequacies, and suffers because he knows he does not have anything to put in its place, while most American writers who have turned from realism have retreated to an academic experimentation. But Rushdie's work, for all its difficulty, is not academic. It is responsive to the world rather than removed from it, and it is because of this responsiveness that the mode in which he works represents the continued life of the novel. That mode—and one wants something better to describe it than the term "magical realism"—is an assertion of individual freedom in a world where freedom is strangled, a proclamation of the imagination's ability to reshape from within the lives upon which brute force is imposed from without.

One learns, almost as the foundation of the liberal arts education whose historical roots are the same as realism's, that such imaginative resourcefulness can save, if not your life, at least your sanity. Most of us don't quite manage to believe in that foundation, however much we profess it. Rushdie's work reveals the essential truth beneath the truism, and suggests as well the kind of world in which one must, sadly, live before one can feel the importance and urgency of such resourcefulness as something other than an intellectual platitude. What remains alive in the world of Sufiya Zinobia is Rushdie's style, a style whose flexibility is not a luxury but a necessity, a way of surviving in a world split between laughter and bloodshed without falling into pieces oneself. *Shame* restores one's faith in the novel's ability to matter.

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BERT O. STATES

One Person Laughing

NORMAN HOLLAND'S *Laughing* falls into two parts.[1] In the first ("Why Do We Laugh?") Holland has painstakingly sorted out "the atticful of theories" about laughter and the comic from the ancients forward. The book would be useful for this part alone to anyone who wants to look into comic theory for the first time or to anyone who has been overwhelmed by the mass and would like to have it all in an orderly perspective. The feeling lingers, however, that Holland isn't really sorting as much as cleaning out the attic to make room for his own theory which he advances in Part Two ("How Can We Ask?"). While his theory is not intended to "rule out the traditional theories of laughter," it will, he says, give them "a new context": it will correct a fundamental deficiency he sees in all other theories.

Holland's theory of laughter is derived chiefly from Heinz Lichtenstein's identity theory which goes beyond Freud's "pleasure principle" and "death instinct" to propose that at "the deepest layer of motivation . . . a human must maintain identity." Holland's thesis is that laughter comes from this source and it differs from "other identity-confirming human activities" in that it is both sudden and playful: we laugh "because we suddenly, playfully confirm our identities through something outside ourselves." What he proposes is a new approach to the question of why we laugh:

> Instead of generalizing about many laughers or seeking a common denominator in all the various occasions on which people laugh, I would like to start with a single person's laughing. . . . In all my scrabbling among ancient and modern theories of laughter, I have never found a detailed case study of one laugher laughing.

This single case study is that of Ellen, a good friend and graduate student whom Holland interviewed for one hour on her responses to the cartoons of B. Kliban. One can hardly question Holland's use of a single "subject" because he is not, like the experimental psychologist, conducting a sampling from which statistical generalizations can be made: the interview is meant to illustrate his theory, not to prove it, and I suppose we can accept that if the theory itself

[1] LAUGHING: A Psychology of Humor, by *Norman N. Holland*. Cornell University Press. $16.95.

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is convincing. The technique consists in Ellen's verbal explanations of her laughter, or failure to laugh, at Kliban's cartoons and Holland's analytical conversion of the explanations into an "identity theme," or a pattern of response and repetition that carries the imprint of her personal "reading" of the world. Getting the "correct" identity theme isn't as important as seeing that *an* identity theme is always somehow involved with the laughter or nonlaughter. If you laugh at a joke, it confirms, or "recreates," your identity; if you don't, it doesn't.

I have problems with both the theory and the method. There seems to me something incomplete about assessing a laugher's reaction to one of her favorite cartoonists. Doesn't the repeated exposure to "old" jokes corrupt the laughter, taking the *sudden*, so to speak, out of sudden and playful? Moreover, it strikes me that Kliban is not really a good—or at least the most rigorous—test of the identity theory of laughter. For one thing, he is a "deep" cartoonist (unlike, say, Price, Saxon, or Addams) in the sense of making you wonder why you are laughing at such *profoundly* repulsive people or at such obvious visual puns on verbal sounds (for instance, the *Genghis & Sylvia Kahn* cartoon). Ellen finds Kliban only "a jokebook. I didn't have to work at it," but her commentary reveals that the world beneath the joke is quite complex. (I have spent over an hour with friends on a single cartoon, *Lucille Was Secretly Thrilled When Norman Sucked Her Toaster*.) Maybe this "depth" factor is precisely why Holland chose Kliban. My point is that a cartoon, and especially Kliban's cartoons, can be "studied," and in the process of study you are bound to reveal something of your identity, just as you would if someone asked you a conceptual question, such as why you vote Republican or why you prefer the mountains to the sea. If Holland is interested in why we laugh, why we do this funny thing with our bodies in reaction to funny things, it seems to me he was obliged to explain how his theory works with more direct, less interpretable, comic stimuli: one-line zingers, movie out-takes and flubs, funny sounds, funny music (the old trombone recording), "Candid Camera" reruns, impersonations, films of people trying to keep a straight face, ice-skating for the first time, getting pies in the face, and so on. These are all laughing matters and, as I take it, Holland means categorically, that when we laugh we are confirming our identity—not simply displaying our personality or individuality, our unavoidable me-ness of manner, but confirming the major "theme" of our lives. It simply eludes me as to how or why that should be the key factor when I laugh at Chaplin on roller skates or kittens stalking their shadows or a canary courting itself in a mirror.

Another question: in such an interview, how do you know what you have found—a cause or an effect? If Ellen laughs suddenly at a cartoon and then explains to Holland what she found funny, is she telling him why she laughed or why she *thinks* she laughed—that is,

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converting the cartoon into some of the things she thought it was about? What is lost in the translation is what is lost in Freud's unintentionally hilarious explanations of the jokes in his famous book: the comic is converted into a concept. Thus the explanation stands crucially between a physiological reaction and a theory Holland is deriving from it. Does it tell us what actually brings on the laughter or does it tell us the kinds of things we can talk about in explaining our laughter? There is a difference. You might enjoy crucifixion jokes because they confirm your self-image as an atheist or your taste for profanation, but would you laugh at a bad one? If you wouldn't, does that mean it doesn't confirm your identity theme or does it mean that the quality of a joke is as important, if not more important, than the load of identity-satisfaction it delivers?

I am far from arguing that Holland's identity theory doesn't have a certain validity. But I have questions about its exclusiveness and the priority of its role in laughter and about whether *it* explains laughter or laughter (like weeping or frowning) is explaining the individual. Holland is aware that Ellen's laughter can be explained in terms of conventional theories of laughter and the comic, the most universally held one perhaps being the "incongruity" theory; but, he says, "No term as abstract as 'incongruity' quite does justice to the individuality of Ellen's response." This is true, just as it is true that no term as abstract as cancer or grief or love quite does justice to the response of the individual undergoing these things. But is individuality of response the question or is it the answer being proposed to the question? My sense is that Holland shuttles between these two positions. He says that the value of his "holistic" technique is that it enables us to construct a portrait of the laugher's identity in a "feedback" situation. But what has this to do with laughter per se? What does it really tell us about laughter as distinguished from any other response? Holland would undoubtedly refer us to the other part of his definition: laughter arises from a sudden and playful stimulus outside ourselves. But these crucial terms are not carefully explored and they open still other questions: No laughter from a stimulus *within*? (If not, why not?) What about gradual laughter, or the "rueful" smile, any smile in fact? Basically, Holland follows Huizinga in his two-page (and only) treatment of play. But what of the "play" of leaves in the wind (at which we laugh), the play of language, or the seeming playfulness of nature as manifested in coincidence? These concepts are all that separate the identity theory of laughter from other forms of identity-confirmation, and one wants to know what they mean and what their phenomenal boundaries are.

Maybe Holland could answer some (or all) of these questions, but he should have anticipated them in the book. Beyond his one-hour interview with Ellen and a chapter devoted to other Kliban laughers in his seminars, he doesn't really test his theory on cases of laughter

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that *might* have little, or less, to do with the identity principle. He simply asks us to assume that if one person displays her identity theme in telling us why she laughs, then identity-confirmation is the cause of the laughter. But there is something vaguely self-fulfilling about coming to an interview, armed with the identity principle, asking an "identity" why it is laughing and having the identity respond: "Because I'm me. This is the kind of thing I laugh at." Holland says that there is a "part of laughing all of us do alike" and a "part of laughing that is completely individual." How could one argue with this? But I think there is a good reason why theorists have always concentrated on the part of laughing we all do alike—that is, on the stimulus rather than on the response: individual response does not *belong* to the theory of laughter and the psychology of humor; or rather, it belongs to such theory no more or less than it belongs to any other sphere of human activity. Holland himself has used it in various projects on reading (*5 Readers Reading*), creative writing, teaching, the popular arts, and simply observing people. His next book might well apply the identity theory to tragedy or to painting, or to our occupational choices, to *anything* that we do out of choice, any *reading* of the world that we make. And what such an application will always find, I suspect, is that we get out of something (as Brooks Atkinson once said of the theatre) pretty much what we bring to it.

Finally, I feel that laughter and the comic get confused in Holland's theory. I know he knows the difference; he mentions laughter produced by tickling and nitrous oxide as having nothing to do with identity. But, as I understand it, he wants to explain the comic through the individual response of laughter. But aren't these two different things? Using laughter as an index of the psychology of humor seems to me an unreliable principle—not wrong, but unreliable. There is humor and wit that does not produce an outright laugh, and one laughs at things that aren't funny. For example, I laugh at an unexpected tax refund. This is neither funny nor does it confirm my identity; I *think* it confirms the fact that I am happy I have more money to do more things my identity requires. And isn't it possible to be moved to laughter by any sudden and playful demonstration of perfection, as when an athlete executes an "impossible" movement on the field? There is also another realm of laughter that Holland does not consider in this book called *Laughing* and it seems a serious shortcoming. One can laugh out of fear and tension. One can laugh when one's death sentence is pronounced (as I read in a recent news story). One can laugh when one is "possessed," as in the guitarist scene in *Death in Venice* in which laughter seems to disintegrate identity beneath "group" identicality. Holland might justly say that these aren't "playful" situations, but they *are* laughing situations and they complicate the phenomenon of laughter far beyond Holland's playful view. In other words, there are all

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kinds of laughter: satanic laughter, cruel laughter, laughter at coincidence and the uncanny, nostalgic laughter, and laughter at one's own stupidity. All (or most) of them have some deep traffic in the comic and many of them have something to do with the endangerment of identity. Can there be such a thing, then, as a single reason for our laughter? There are, after all, only so many things the face can do with itself. The face is a sort of *bricoleur* of the emotions; it has a small toolbox of muscles to deal with an infinite number of projects and its two most useful tools are the laugh and the cry. Sometimes they change places and sometimes they are combined in one massive paroxysm, as when we laugh and cry at the narrow escape of someone we love.

Why do we laugh? Holland's conclusion seems to be too confident and too simple:

> Because we are, as the children's song says,
>
> Free to be
> You and me.
>
> Precisely.

This is one side of the matter. But there is also the old cynic's song—

> Condemned to be
> You and me.

—and being more Baudelairean than Holland I think it is this state of "fallenness" that provokes laughter from the other side of the mouth. It too has something to do with identity and with the comic. But there is much fear and trembling in this laughter and possibly a sense that in laughter at least there is some safety in numbers. This is the grim humor behind Kliban's cartoon *Always Hide In A Place Where There Are A Lot of The Same Things*. Offhand, I don't know why I laugh at this cartoon. If I were to tell you why I think I do I would probably reveal my identity theme. But it is quite possible that in the process I might also articulate your identity theme as well as my own. This seems to me the aim of all commentary on art: it tells us how our deep differences rest on the still deeper foundation of our humanness. In other words, if Kliban is right about us a lot of us are hiding in the same places for the same reasons.

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JAY PARINI

Essaying the World

IT'S TOO BAD THAT SO MUCH of the best writing being done in this country falls into a category called "nonfiction" and so must be generically defined by what it isn't. Prose should not have to pretend that it's not "true" to summon the highest sort of reader expectations. The four books under review here all participate in the realm of art to one degree or another. As sheer writing, they each compare favorably with most of the fiction and poetry being turned out these days. It is too bad that John Updike, whose recent *Hugging the Shore*[1] is the first of the four books I'll discuss, saw fit to undermine his own project—and nonfiction in general—at the outset: "Writing criticism," he says, "is to writing fiction and poetry as hugging the shore is to sailing in the open sea." Though subtly, his analogy suggests that "nonimaginative" writing is easier and therefore less valuable than "imaginative" writing. As ever, this depends on the writing.

Interestingly, Updike's own best essays are at least as good—perhaps even better—than his best fiction. Because he insists on "hugging the shore" of the world, he rarely gets lost at sea as he often does in his lesser novels, where the narrative momentum often simply dies. The famous Updike intelligence, which sometimes leaves huge alien footprints across the surface of his fiction, stands him in good stead as a critic. His mind is large, exquisitely furnished, and capable of entertaining an extraordinarily diverse range of guests. In addition to surveying the entire careers of Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—the three finest pieces in this collection—Updike comments extensively on 131 "other people's books." In doing so, he makes easy reference to at least as many books not directly under review. One is left stunned by the vastness of his enterprise.

But vastness alone, involving breadth of mind and ambition, is only part of Updike's achievement. His characteristic style—supple, witty, ornately metaphorical—seems infinitely capable of adaptation. Style is a form of perception, of course, and Updike's *aperçus* consistently nail down important truths about the author under review. A few examples follow:

> These supernatural preoccupations of Bellow's are not in themselves unworthy—it takes a courageous humanism to perceive that life is infinitely cramped by the loss of an expectation of an afterlife—but they do make the veil of his fictional phenomena

[1] HUGGING THE SHORE, by *John Updike*. Knopf. $19.95.

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> thin. We know, reading, that there will be many surprises but no revelations, that no turn of event will dreadfully deepen the theme, that the essentially cerebral and comic spirit of the creator will contrive to preserve his hero from essential harm.
>
> Nothing Anne Tyler sets down is untrue. But the impending moral encloses the excitements of her story in a circle of safety that gives them the coziness of entertainment. It may be that in this Protestant land, with its reverence for sweat and constipation, we distrust artificers, peaceable cultivators of the imaginary. Miss Tyler tends her human flora for each book's season of bloom and then latches the garden gate with a smile.
>
> Ann Beattie's first novel thaws quite beautifully; our first impression, of a pale blank prose wherein events ramify with the random precision of snow-ferns on a winter window, yields, in the second half, to a keen warmth of identification with the hero, Charles, and an ardent admiration of the author's cool powers.

The above remarks are taken out of context, but they exemplify Updike's awesome command of style as an instrument of criticism.

More impressive yet is his ability to sustain an argument throughout an essay or review. An artist to the core, Updike works his metaphors carefully, grooms them throughout the commentary, and brings them to a point of harvest. That his criticism has no obvious theoretical underpinnings is quite irrelevant. One can learn more about *writing* from Updike than from a boatload of Derridas. In a brilliant discussion of Milan Kundera, for instance, Updike neatly separates the Czech author's obdurate strangeness, one that "locks us out," from the more familiar strangeness of Donald Barthelme or Barry Hannah, which "derives from developments in a culture that, even if we do not live in Manhattan or come from Mississippi, is American and therefore instinctively recognizable. These authors ring willful changes and inversions upon forms with which we, too, have become bored."

Occasionally the fiction writer in Updike swamps the critic, as in the opening paragraph of a piece on Wallace Stevens, which begins: "The city of Reading, in southeastern Pennsylvania, sits dreaming and declining in the center of a lozenge-shaped county of bosomy farmland, Berks." Indeed, Updike would have quickly slashed this sentence from any short story on the first rewrite. But such lapses are forgivable. Less so are the tediously overwritten "pieces" that make up the first sixty-nine pages of *Hugging the Shore*, and the Appendix, which consists of trivial remarks delivered on this or that formal occasion. Updike should have been stricter with himself and done some pruning. This volume comprises over 900 pages, and the reader is left to plod through all of it in search of gold. The gold is there, especially in the essays on "American Masters," in the introduction to Nabokov's lectures, and in selected reviews. But Up-

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dike's apparent compulsion to get every scrap he writes between cloth covers detracts, slightly, from his stature. On the other hand, one should probably not quibble with a gift as prodigiously instructive and readable as this collection.

Joseph Epstein is another critic of unusual talent; his work, like Updike's, usually appears first in periodicals. *Commentary* regularly prints his tough-minded essays on contemporary fiction, and *The American Scholar*, which he edits, regularly exhibits his "familiar" essays. *The Middle of My Tether*[2] is a gathering of these, an elegant miscellany that does justice to the range of Epstein's work. The familiar essay has an aura all its own. As E. B. White, the current *maestro* of the genre, recently said, "The essayist is a self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest." This belief can be a true one, provided the essayist maintains a certain rather high standard of intelligence, charm, and sympathy. Epstein has all three qualities in abundance. He writes in a remarkably offhand way about things one would never expect an author to make an essay out of, such as retrieving the mail, fountain pens, forgetfulness, or the way people write their names. A familiar essayist delights in showing how trivial things can fascinate us, probably because life is made up of trivial things. Great Issues concern us for a limited number of minutes in the average day, whereas we do worry a good deal about the mail, imagining that somehow something in a white or brown envelope will come and change our lives, however slightly. Epstein writes:

> But what should a perfect delivery of mail contain? This of course will differ from person to person, but for me it would include a letter from an old friend with whom I have been too long out of touch, a letter from someone I love, two letters in airmail envelopes from overseas, a letter containing some found money (an unexpected tax rebate, say, or a reprint fee), a good book that has been long awaited, a letter from someone previously unknown but obviously good-hearted and intelligent, and (finally) a letter informing me that an engagement I had foolishly committed myself to, and that has worried me ever since, has been indefinitely postponed.

If the mail gets routed through heaven, Epstein's golden letter box may one day contain such riches.

Among the wittiest essays is "In and Around Books," which treats everything about books except what they happen to be about. Epstein is a master of what might be called the phenomenology of publishing: dust jackets, prefaces, footnotes, dedications, and so on. Each is a sign, betokening a world of implication. Indexes, for example, present a realm of possibilities. Who, reading a favorite biography, has not skimmed the index to see the litany of names that

[2] THE MIDDLE OF MY TETHER, by *Joseph Epstein*. Norton. $14.95.

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make up the biographee's privileged circle? Which, among writers, have not nervously skimmed an index in the vain hope of seeing a glancing reference to themselves? Epstein notes that William F. Buckley, understanding this habit of writers, once sent Norman Mailer a book of his essays; but before doing so, he slyly wrote "Hi" in the index next to Mailer's name! It is this sort of almost embarrassingly true perception that makes Epstein's essays absorbing reading. His foibles tend to be ours. I, for instance, immediately identified with his confession of a secret desire to have "endless elegant notebooks filled with penetrating observations, all written in a fine script." But my penmanship, like Epstein's, isn't quite up to such efforts. "My handwriting on costly stationery would be like chili on Limoges china," he says. Such one-liners pepper these essays, which consistently entertain and occasionally instruct.

Lewis Thomas writes in a more serious vein. He is chancellor of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and the author of three previous books: a memoir of his life in the medical profession and two essay collections. His limpid style and deep humanity have created for him a dedicated readership. Like Stephen Jay Gould and Edward O. Wilson, he is able to write about science with great urgency and great ease. But few stylists in any subject area write with more passion than he does. In "The Attic of the Brain," for example, Thomas urges us to let the unconscious *be* unconscious: "Forget whatever you feel like forgetting. From time to time, practice *not* being open, discover new things *not* to talk about, learn reserve, hold the tongue." That's all very well said, but then: "Attempting to operate one's own mind, powered by such a magical instrument as the human brain, strikes me as rather like using the world's biggest computer to add columns of figures, or towing a Rolls-Royce with a nylon rope." This kind of analogy—explicit, vivid—recurs in each of the twenty-four shimmering essays that make up *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*.[3]

Part of the pleasure of these essays resides in the writer's gently authoritative tone. When he writes about the federal government's near abandonment of support for basic scientific research and the effects this will have on the next generation, one trusts that Thomas writes from the inside. He uses factual evidence when he must, asking questions like this one: "How do you protect a society against destruction if you have an *almost-perfect* antiballistic missile defense, one that will pick off with unfailing accuracy 950 out of 1000 missiles coming our way but will miss the other 50?" But numbers and complex scientific formulations rarely crop up in this writing. Lewis Thomas is a humanist as much as a scientist; as such, he is able to discuss the Lovelock-Margulis theory of the biosphere as a self-regulating ecosystem and Wallace Stevens' "Man with the Blue Guitar" in the same paragraph, using the latter to gloss the former. In fact, his major premise in all these essays is that "We would be bet-

[3] LATE NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LISTENING TO MAHLER'S NINTH SYMPHONY, by *Lewis Thomas*. Viking. $12.95.

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ter off if we had never invented the terms 'science' and 'humanities' and then set them up as if they represented two different kinds of intellectual enterprise." The fatal separation of the world into "spirit" and "matter"—a division reinforced by Western philosophies—has led to the fragmentation that Thomas regards as potentially ominous.

The ominous note sounds throughout these essays. It throbs like a sad bass accompaniment, playing off the delightful melodies that his nimble mind generates. The title essay is a masterwork of emotional and intellectual orchestration, beginning like this: "I cannot listen to Mahler's Ninth Symphony with anything like the old melancholy mixed with the high pleasure I used to take from this music." That symphony, for him, represents "leave-taking at its best." Dying, for a doctor-poet like Thomas, should be seen as the most natural of all experiences. But Thomas' mind swarms, during Mahler's last movement, with images of nuclear destruction, "a cloud of radioactivity drifting along the Engadin, from the Moloja Pass to Ftan, killing off the part of the earth I love more than any other part." He writes this essay with a copy of the government pamphlet entitled *MX Basing* on his desk, an analysis of the alternative strategies for placement and protection of nuclear missiles powerful enough to obliterate a hundred Hiroshimas. This vision naturally destroys his sense of Mahler. "Now, those cellos sound in my mind like the opening of all the hatches and the instant before ignition." He goes back in memory to a decade during his youth when the idea that the twenty-first century might not occur seemed unimaginable: "I was a college sophomore and had decided that Wallace Stevens and I possessed a comprehensive understanding of everything needed for a life." After listening to a man on television explain that, by careful planning for civilian defense, the U.S. could reduce the number killed in a nuclear war to only forty million, perhaps even twenty, Thomas is led to the following devastating conclusion:

> If I were sixteen or seventeen years old and had to listen to that, or read things like that, I would want to give up listening and reading. I would begin thinking up new kinds of sounds, different from any music heard before, and I would be twisting and turning to rid myself of human language.

In an utterly different mode, much less serious, Paul Fussell writes about the class system in America.[4] *Class* is mordantly funny in the manner of Swift, Fussell's clearest ancestor. The author, who has written several good books on the eighteenth century, two books on prosody, a study of English travel writing between the wars, and a celebrated book called *The Great War and Modern Memory*, offers what he calls in the subtitle, *A Guide Through the American*

[4] CLASS: A Guide Through The American System, by *Paul Fussell*. Summit. $13.95.

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System. "Although most Americans sense that they live in an extremely complicated system of social classes," he writes, "and suspect that much of what is thought and done here is prompted by considerations of status, the subject remains murky." Not a sociologist himself, like C. Wright Mills or Leonard Reissman, both of whom wrote pioneering studies of class in America, Fussell comes to his subject as a critic. With deadly wit, he has written what amounts to an anatomy of human (and specifically American) folly, dealing primarily with the visible and audible signs of social class, such as clothing, furniture, habits, and speech—all things about which we presumably have some choice.

As Fussell notes, Americans like to imagine that we have achieved something close to a classless society. "Nowhere," wrote de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, "do citizens appear so insignificant as in a democratic nation." It thus becomes imperative that people somehow *achieve* significance, even if they have to buy it. Moving deftly through the nine social classes that he posits, from "top-out-of-sight" to "bottom-out-of-sight," Fussell cites with brutal accuracy the class customs of each. The upper class, we learn, detests showy cars—a sure sign of being *nouveau*. If you are "with it" as an upper classman, he says, perpetually tongue-in-cheek, you'll drive a dirty Chevy or Ford. Next best is a beat-up "good" car, a Jaguar or BMW. But

> you may not have a Rolls, a Cadillac, or a Mercedes. Especially a Mercedes . . . which the intelligent young in West Germany regard, quite correctly, as "a sign of vulgarity, a car of the kind owned by Beverly Hills dentists or African cabinet ministers."

Fussell is quoting Joseph Epstein, incidentally, with whom he has much in common as a social critic.

Not entirely facetiously, Fussell concludes with a chapter called "The X Way Out." You can't be born into the X class: you earn "X-personhood by a strenuous effort of discovery in which curiosity and originality are indispensable." In this, *Class* ends up a very American book after all. Ben Franklin would have liked it. You can pull yourself up by the boot straps and get out of the futile grind of class panic and begin to enjoy "something like the LIBERTY promised on the coinage." X-people are chiefly distinguished by their refusal to condone the traditional class system, by standing aside. They pursue their own lives, according to principles of reason. They do, of course, form a class in themselves, which Fussell acknowledges. But since there is no real "way out" of a class system, he is no doubt right to think we should do our best to understand it and, when possible, stand outside it. For readers who can't manage to do this, he offers—in a witty appendix—a do-it-yourself class test. You add and subtract points for this or that object in your house. For instance, you must subtract six points for displaying the *National Enquirer* on your coffee table. You may add eight points for putting out THE HUDSON REVIEW.

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Velvet placed her hand on the back of his, feeling the bones and knotty veins there, and, like a child playing with a toy car, slid it across her hip, up her ribs; she guided his hand to her breast and held it there. She felt terribly shy at that moment. She felt embarrassed, confused. She felt Cro-Magnon. She felt that had she simply jabbed a finger at her breast and grunted in order to make him understand she wanted him to touch her there she could not have been more obvious. There she was. There wasn't a subtle thing about her.

—Barbara Haas, "When California Was an Island," p. 21

There is a new mode of theatricality on Broadway. It could be called Hyper-realism, to distinguish it from its Super and Magic counterparts in contemporary painting and fiction. Better still, Idiot Realism, since its intent is not to represent but to replicate, not to engage the imagination (not even a little) but to coerce the senses. "You want to see a cabaret?" I can hear the producer, Allan Carr, asking. "We won't just make something that *looks* like a cabaret. We'll actually build one—right there on stage." Indeed, the sets could not have been more realistic, unless they were covered with dollar bills.

—Robert Asahina on theater, p. 99

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